

THREE EASTERN PLAYS

WITH A TERMINAL ESSAY
ON "SUTTEE"

BY

EDWARD AND THEODOSIA THOMPSON

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•EASTER EVENING

BY

THEODOSIA THOMPSON

TO ZAHLEH, SYRIA

CHARACTERS IN THE ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE

HEPHZIBAH, *wife of Nicolas the Deacon*

ANNA, *wife of Simeon*

MIRIAM

ANTONY

NICOLAS

SIMEON

*The action is supposed to take place four years after the
death of Christ*

EASTER EVENING

Late afternoon in a Syrian town on the eastern foothills of the Lebanon. The home of MIRIAM—a scene in which, at first, the background and foreground seem to have changed places—the dark room serving as a mere setting to the brilliant sunset beyond

The room is small, its walls are plastered with mud and its low ceiling of rafters is blackened with smoke. A rough mat partly covers the earthen floor. Along the left wall, toward the front of the stage, the only seats—a few flat cushions—are ranged. In front of these stands a low, round table, and near by a charcoal brazier glows dully, its fire almost smothered in ashes. Behind the cushions, and toward the back of the room, hangs a curtain that hides a recess or deep, shelved cupboard. In the back wall, a window (left) and door (extreme right). Between these a rude wooden stand built to hold an earthenware water-jar. A bare wall to the right.

The room is in shadow—thrown into darkness, rather than illuminated, by the flaming sunset that lights the mountain-wall in the East. Through the small barred window and wide-flung door, that open directly on to a worn, white road, one looks straight across a valley and a flat plain—already dim with twilight—to this sudden, naked wall of Anti-Lebanon, kindled into vivid fire—copper, rose, crimson, carmine—glowing and throbbing between the purple shadow of the plain and the intense blue of the waiting evening sky.

The room is empty. A few people pass along the twilit road—an old woman, bowed beneath the weight of her water-jar, a youth on a tired, dusty donkey,

a small party of Roman soldiers loitering, a group of children with a battered kite Then silence A minute passes Steps and voices are heard again, and two women appear in the doorway They are dressed simply, in dark homespun woollen gowns, with heavy white veils wound around head and shoulder HEPHZIBAH is the older woman—over fifty, stout, motherly, ineffective ANNA, about thirty, is sharply pretty, small, active, shrewish

HEPHZIBAH.

Miriam !

(Pause Knocking louder.)

Miriam !

Miriam !—She is not here.

What shall we do ?

ANNA.

Will you come back with me ?

HEPHZIBAH.

A third time ! No We'll go inside, and wait

(The women enter, standing at first near the door and looking out)

A wasted afternoon ! Three hours ago

They said she had gone to fill her water-jar

That cannot be—the spring is close at hand

And yet— (Turning, and looking at the empty stand) the jar is gone.

ANNA

Go to the spring

You'll find it lying, empty, on the grass

The women of the quarter know it well,

Miriam's water-jar ! It often lies

For hours together, while she climbs the hill

To wander through the vineyards just beyond.
She'll not be back till dark

HEPHZIBAH.

Till dark, you say !

ANNA.

It's what I've told you all a hundred times !
If you lived in the quarter you would know !
She often roams at dusk, the other night
She passed our house in starlight Simeon then
Bade me go out and try to reason with her
Let the Church do it ! I have had enough
Of talking reason to a madwoman

HEPEZIBAH.

The Church is speaking—

(*Sighs, turning away from the door*)
And I could but wish

That we were not its mouthpiece

(*She crosses the room and sits down wearily on
one of the cushion seats, loosening her veil
and smoothing back her hair*)

Nicolas

Will grow impatient at the long delay

He waits our answer—and the elders meet

At sunset (Holding her hands out to the brazier)

Miriam's fire is almost out

The room is cold— (Looking about her)

and bare—but clean enough

(ANNA, staring out of the door, does not answer.)

(Sighing heavily)

It wearies one, this idling through the day

ANNA (without turning)

It doesn't weary Miriam

(A soldier loiters past and, seeing ANNA standing staring out of the door, lounges forward with a smile. She starts violently, pulls her veil across her face, and hurries across the room to HEPHZIBAH, out of sight of the road. The soldier shrugs his shoulders, and goes off, whistling.)

The beast!

HEPHZIBAH

What do you mean?

ANNA

A soldier!

HEPHZIBAH.

Comir.

ANNA

No—I don't know—Oh, let us get away!

This house is vile Why should we soil ourselves?

HEPHZIBAH

This house is vile?

ANNA

Is known to all the camp
Else why should soldiers, passing by 'the door,
Leer at me and come forward?—Let us go!
Let the men deal with her! Let Nicolas
Bring in the elders! Let them question her!

HEPHZIBAH

No, daughter, we must wait Sit here awhile
Quiet yourself—no one can see you now

(ANNA seats herself beside HEPHZIBAH)

'Tis, as they said this morning, kinder far
That women first should speak to her, not men

ANNA.

Not men ! You wrong her courage ! Miriam fear
To talk with men ! She'll thank you for this kindness !
If I've tried once, I've tried a hundred times
To speak to her—in kindness as a friend—
Only to find her proud, indifferent

(Mimicking a proud gesture, with a toss of her head)

"Who is it speaks to *me*, the Magdalene ? "

HEPHZIBAH.

Anna !

ANNA

You fear her—every one of you !
Two years ago, she came from Galilee,
Bringing her great name with her—"I am she,
Who knew the Lord, who walked and talked with Him
You knew Him not I am the Magdalene
'Twas thus and thus "

HEPHZIBAH

'Hush, Anna !

ANNA

Oh, you all
Fell at her feet and did her reverence
You added pity to your foolishness
And let her waywardness go unrebuked
How has it helped us—this great name of hers ?
This Gentile town where once we lived in peace
Is full of tales of our strange madwoman,
The Christian madwoman who lives alone,

Who roams the hills, who walks abroad at dusk—
 Or, if not mad, then worse, a hundred times,—
 A woman in this quarter, near the camp,
 Who lives thus freely, faring forth at night,
 Past midnight even—as we found by chance

(*Silence*)

'HEPHZIBAH.

You say the door was open?

ANNA.

No, unlocked
 Simeon and Andrew would have raised the town,
 Knocking and shouting, so I tried the latch.
 It was unfastened, and I pushed the door
 Open a little—thrust our lantern in—
 The room was empty

HEPHZIBAH

Empty before dawn

ANNA

Two hours before the dawn—A year ago,
 Through some mischance we reached your house
 too late

For the bread-breaking This year, Simeon
 Had us awake too early, in his zeal
 'Twas scarce past midnight when he wakened us
 It lacked two hours of dawn when, passing by
 This house, we thought to waken Miriam
 And take her with us

HEPHZIBAH

And she was not here

ANNA.

We said, " She has outdone us and gone on "
 But she was not with you•

HEPHZIBAH

Where was she ?

ANNA

Where ?

That is the question we have come to ask

(Pause)

I wonder what she'll answer Heretofore,
 When asked about her lonely wanderings,
 She's prated of the " peace of open hills "
 She'd have us think she lives in reverie,
 In prayer and holy dreams Credulous fools !
 How she must scorn us, listening open-mouthed,
 Envying, never doubting, while she weaves
 With skilful speech a tapestry of lies,
 Bright, holy lies, fair pictures of her past
 That dazzle us—the while, behind the screen,
 She plies her old trade—

HEPHZIBAH

Anna ! Anna ! Hush !

We know but little—have not come to judge,
 Only to question Put aside these thoughts !

ANNA

To think that women should be fooled by her !
 Men, yes,—but women—who should know and see
 She is what once she was , she cannot change
 Harlot of Magdala, a loathsome thing !

She flings a crimson cloak of piety
 Around her beauty, gaining added power,
 But none forget her past of sinning. Men,
 Even our own men, follow her with their eyes,
 Wondering always what dark dreams are hers,
 What flaming memories She poisons them.
 Andrew, my brother, sickens for love of her—
 My husband, Simeon—

(Sobs)

—Hateful, utter fools !

Blind fools—what is to teach you ? Must you see
 The seven devils frisking in this house
 Before you know her ?

(Covers her face with her hands, shaken by dry
 sobbing)

If I could tell my hate !

HEPHZIBAH

Anna, my daughter !

ANNA (rising, and dashing away her tears).

What am I doing ?

(Walks to the window, and looks out for a moment)

The sun

Has nearly left the mountains Shall we wait,
 Or shall we go—to waste another day
 To-morrow ?

HEPHZIBAH (rising)

No, I cannot come again
 This hill is long and steep—and I grow old
 Nor can I go back answerless Nicolas waits

(ANNA turns from the window and, half idly, half
 curiously, flings aside the curtain over the
 recess and inspects the contents of the shelves)

HEPHZIBAH.

Even now she may be coming—

(Crosses to the door and looks down the road)

ANNA (*sharply*)

Hephzibah !

HEPHZIBAH (*turning, startled*).

• What ?

What is it ?

ANNA

(holding out a small white jar that she has lifted down from the top shelf)

Look ! (HEPHZIBAH hurries across)

Do you know what this is ?

Egyptian ointment ! Smell it Do you know
How much it costs ? A thousand sesterces !
The price of this would give a weekly dole
To all our poor for many months to come !

• HEPHZIBAH

A thousand sesterces !

•

ANNA

• • • Or more than that

A simple woman is our Miriam,
With simple tastes, living in poverty
A frugal, holy life ! Two months ago,
Nicolas, pitying such poverty,
Offered her—did he not ?—a weekly dole

(HEPHZIBAH nods)

And she refused it—great nobility !

We bowed again before her simple pride.

Black hypocrite ! Spending her hoarded wealth
 On lures of harlotry—ointments and scents !
 She knows their use and value !

(Takes the jar to the window, HEPHZIBAH following her.)

HEPHZIBAH (peering closer in the darkness)
 What is that ?

That dull, red stain ?

ANNA.

How do I know ? No doubt,
 Some other ointment—some vermillion stain
 To brighten her great lips—dropped here in haste,
 Some evil night, and never cleaned away.
 Look further, and you'll find, without a doubt,
 Yet other jars—a jar of crimson paste—
 A flask of myrrh—a—

(A sound at the door makes both women start
 ANNA hastily replaces the jar on the shelf

MIRIAM appears in the doorway, her canteen-jar on her shoulder, one arm lifted and lightly holding it in place. Not hearing the women's voices, she turns for a last look at the sunset before entering. Tall, straight, nobly proportioned—a woman of twenty-five—dressed in a simple gown of rich blue, she focuses the glowing colours of the outer scene, giving an impression of extraordinarily tried beauty that is heightened by the darkness of the inner room, in which dusk has gathered apace.

By this time the two other women are barely visible—mere silhouettes against the barred window. They hurry forward to the cushions

where they have been sitting, and are standing there when MIRIAM enters

MIRIAM turns at last, and, lifting her jar from her shoulder, enters the door)

THE WOMEN

Peace be unto you !

MIRIAM (*startled*)

And on you, peace ! Who waits here in the dark ?

ANNA

Hephzibah, wife of Nicolas, and I,
Anna, your neighbour, wife of Simeon

MIRIAM

God grant you peace, this Easter eventide !

THE WOMEN (*murmuring formally*)

And grant you peace !

MIRIAM

Pray sit you down and rest
(*The women seat themselves*)

You have been waiting long ? The room is dark
We need a lamp

• (*Puts her jar on the stand, and, going to the cupboard, lights a small oil-lamp, which she places on the table before the women. She shuts the door and closes the window by pushing together the rude wooden shutters. Coming forward again, she bends over the brazier*)

The fire—

HEPHZIBAH.

There is no need.

We are not cold Will you not also rest?

(MIRIAM, stooping, picks up a cushion that lies against the wall, and brings it out further into the room, so that, sitting on it, she faces HEPHZIBAH and ANNA across the table, her back to the door The light cast by the little oil-lamp flares feebly The three women's veils and faces alone are clear against a background of darkness and great wavering shadows)

Daughter, we looked for you this Easter morning
You did not join us

MIRIAM

(hesitates, glances at ANNA's set face)
It is as you say.

HEPHZIBAH

You rarely meet with us, and yet we thought—
On this, the greatest of our holy days,— (Pauses)

MIRIAM (gently).

To have me with you It was in my heart ,
And I made ready, long before the dawn
But, once outside the house, the rising wind,
Flowing so cold and strong across the world,
Seemed the same wind that, in Jerusalem,
Swept, wild and desolate, across the hills
That other Easter morning , and the stars
Burned as they burned that morning—steadily—
Cold fires in the cold blackness overhead
Forgive me, mother, but I could not then
Descend into the crowded, reeking town,

Still breathing of the night As in a dream
 I turned towards the hills to watch the dawn—
 To live again that morning—

ANNA (*to HEPHZIBAH*)

As I said !

How she must laugh at us !

HEPHZIBAH (*recalled thus sharply*)

But, Miriam,

Surely it is unwise to roam abroad,
 Alone, at dawn and dusk

MIRIAM

I take no harm

HEPHZIBAH

It is unwise that you should live alone

MIRIAM

I *am* alone, mother

HEPHZIBAH

You need not be

Our house is open to you You should live
 Down in the Christian quarter with your friends—
 Not in' this neighbourhood, so far away
 Now that the camp is pitched in Eli's field,
 This quarter is unsafe for such as you
 You know what women settle near the camp

ANNA

It may be for their sake that Miriam
 Chooses to stay here—helping, teaching them—
 A great vocation.

That, too, is true. He did not understand.
Even from such I take no harm.

MIRIAM (to HEPHAZIBEH).

In truth,
Why traffic with the common soldiery?
Are there not officers? Centurions?

HEPHAZIBEH

No, Miriam. He did not understand;
And no one understands. Why keep this house?
Sell it, and live amongst us in the town.

MIRIAM (to herself) .

The town—the Christian quarter—close and dark!
Must I then leave the hills and spend my days .
Prisoned and pent—because men's evil tongues
And evil thoughts will not leave me alone?

(To HEPHAZIBEH.)

Men's idle talk is no new thing to me.
If I am strong to bear it, cannot you,
Trusting me, mother, go your ways in peace?

HEPHZIBAH

Daughter, our ways are yours, or crossed by yours
 We are all Christians in a Gentile town
 The judgment passed on you falls on us all,
 And hearts that do not understand your ways,
 Grow hard against us (Hesitates)

We have come as friends,
 But more,—as messengers, sent by the Church,—
 Who ask you to give up a wayward life,
 A stumbling-block to many—and to live—

MIRIAM (*interrupting*)

The Church has sent you!

HEPHZIBAH

As the elders' wives
 It was agreed this morning

MIRIAM

But the Church!—
 Surely they trust me! You do not believe—
 You, Hephzibah, and Anna, do not think—

ANNA (*coldly*)

The message has been given

(MIRIAM rises and stands, staring across the room
 Silence)

HEPHZIBAH (*timidly*)

Miriam!

MIRIAM (*unheeding, to herself*)

I am alone again.

ANNA

Now she must weep,
 And agonize over a loneliness
 Of her own choice !

HEPHZIBAH

(*also rising, goes across the room, putting a hand on MIRIAM's shoulder*)

Daughter, will you not speak ?

MIRIAM.

Words will not make you trust me

HEPHZIBAH

We but ask—

MIRIAM

Nor any act of mine—for all my life
 Is shadowed by the life that went before
 I may forget, but men will not forget.
 My past lives in their eyes, to torture me
 I thought you friends—

HEPHZIBAH

Is it so much to ask ?
 That you should leave this house—that you should
 come

And live among us as a sister should,
 Sharing the lot of women, sheltered, safe,
 Protected from the evil world—if not
 By one man's love (marriage you will not have)—
 Then by our common love ?

MIRIAM.

Mother, your heart
 And words are gentle, truly, but my heart
 Longs to be free Why should our lives be spent
 Shut in by stones and mud ? Why should our minds
 Be meshed in webs of our own fashioning—
 Fastened for ever to dull, dusty things,
 Drearly threading a blind, heavy track,
 Worm-like amid our stuffs and furniture—
 The same blind way, always the same blind way ?
 Are you so happy ? Do you never hear
 The night-wind on the mountains, the great wind
 That comes from the dark space between the stars
 And shakes our valley as it rushes by ?
 Or do you only hear, beside your door,
 The fig-leaves rustle and the olives shake,
 And turn again to sleep ? Do you not long
 To climb the hill, leaving the town behind,
 And walk among the vineyards and the fields ?

It is another life that I live there
 Amid the holiness of silent hills,
 That look across the plain to other hills,
 More silent yet and holier, whose calm lines
 Rise in white Hermon to a prayer of peace
 Lifted above the world.

HEPHZIBAH (*gently*)

Long years ago,
 I, too, believed this was the better life
 Our childhood days are dreams of idleness,
 And youth looks back on them with aching heart
 Hating life's bondage But the years go by,
 And men and women find themselves content

With homely duties Surely, Miriam,
 You are too wise to think that happiness
 Is idle living ?

MIRIAM

Mother, forgive my words
 Life binds us all—women it binds the most
 And yet some hug a needless bondage, surely,
 Nor lift their weary eyes, nor seek the peace
 That waits beside them Did the women sin
 Who left their busy looms and household cares,
 Following the Master, listening to His word,
 Beside the lake or in the open fields
 And upland pastures of our Galilee ?

ANNA (*springing up*)

Your Galilee ! Always your Galilee !
 Leave us in peace—go back to Galilee !
 Why did you ever leave your Galilee ?
 What brought you here among us ? Was there not
 Great lamentation, beating of the breast,
 When you had gone, leaving them desolate ?
 Have they not languished these two weary years ?
 Pity their great bereavement ! Go in peace !
 Go back to them ! Go back to Galilee !

MIRIAM (*in a low voice*)

Why did I leave—

(*Turning suddenly to HEPHZIBAH*)

Oh, mother, let me stay !

My heart was weary, and I longed for peace—
 And here peace found me in your hillside town.
 I burden no one In this simple house
 My wants are few My spinning earns my bread,
 I bake and scour as you do—

ANNA (*with hate*)

And, like us,

You share your wealth, giving it to the poor

MIRIAM

You speak in scorn 'Tis true, I have no wealth

ANNA

'Tis true, you hide it well ! (To HEPHZIBAH)

No, let me speak

(Again to MIRIAM)

All winter long, you had no wealth to share
With cold and hungry folk—yet you can buy
Egyptian ointments !—Yes, " your wants are few ! "
But costly—as befits a Magdalene !

MIRIAM

What do you mean ?

ANNA

(going to the cupboard and taking down
the jar)

Tell us, what did this cost ?

MIRIAM (*seizing it*)

That you should touch it !

ANNA.

Softly, Miriam !

We would have answers, and not tragedy.
When did you own a thousand sesterces,
Price of this pretty jar ?MIRIAM (*in a low voice, turning away*)

Four years ago

ANNA.

Four years ago ! Always four years ago !
 The phrase grows ancient, and a little stale,—
 As would the ointment !

MIRIAM (*to herself*)

Have I, then, done wrong
 To keep it all these years ? Even unsealed—
 Unsealed and used—it would have fetched a price.

(With a sudden revulsion)

Never ! I could not ! Rather bury it,
 Or pour it on the fire, than it should pass
 Into men's careless hands !

ANNA (*to HEPHZIBAH*)

You question her
 She will not answer me—but be direct
 The Church wants answers, not these idle tales.

HEPHZIBAH

Speak to me, Miriam I do not ask
 For my own sake, but for the Church Speak to us !
 My daughter, trust our love !

MIRIAM

Until to-day

I have told no one of this—

(As in a dream.)

. . . In that hour

When hope died with the Lord upon the cross,
 Joseph the Arimathæan having gone
 To beg the body for fair burial,
 I hastened to the market-place alone,
 Bought spices and this ointment, and returned
 To Golgotha. They had laid the Lord away—

The soldiers stood, ready to roll the stone
 With tears I begged to enter—Joseph said,
 “ Let her go in ”, so one impatiently
 Thrust in my hands a lamp, and down the steps
 I went into the darkened tomb, and there
 Lifted the cloth and looked on His dear face
 . . . I broke the jar—from wounds that bled afresh
 There came this stain, dearer than my heart’s blood

ANNA

Blasphemy !

HEPHZIBAH.

Miriam !

(*A loud knock at the door The women start.*)
 It is Nicolas,

Tired at last of waiting

MIRIAM

(*stooping to place the jar on the table*)
 Enter in !

A MAN’S VOICE (*as the door is flung open*).

Is this the dwelling of the Magdalene ?

(*The short twilight is over The door opens on darkness Night and distant stars A tall figure in the doorway The wind, rushing in, nearly puts out the lamp which MIRIAM is lifting from the table*)

MIRIAM (*startled at the sound of the voice*)

Who is it ?

(*Turns quickly toward the door, the lamp in her hands The women, thrown into darkness by her shadow, are scarcely visible. The light*

falls on the glinting armour and heavy crimson cloak of a Roman officer, young—not over thirty-five—dark-eyed, imperious.)

ANTONY (gazing intently at her).

Antony—And you at last!

After a hundred years!

(Enters, closing the door behind him, and comes forward. MIRIAM steps backward, stays, and, as if to save herself from falling, stretches out a hand towards the women. HEPHZIBAH involuntarily reaches out to steady her, but ANNA strikes down her hand angrily.)

ANNA.

Leave her alone!

How can you touch her? What is she to us?
A harlot—caught at last! Why do we wait?

(The women pull their veils across their faces and, passing behind MIRIAM, leave at once, with no word of farewell. ANTONY, who has checked at the sight of them, comes forward again, as the door closes)

ANTONY.

Forgive me. I had thought you were alone.
My eyes were dazzled by the sudden light
And your dear face. My spirit, sick with hope,
Swooned into darkness at the sight of you,
After long years—after long, weary years

(Puts his hand on her shoulder, eagerly scanning her face. MIRIAM turns away, her hand over her eyes.)

Miriam, speak! Have the years killed your love?

Can you forget our life in Galilee ?
 Our life—our love—the son you bore to me ?
 Where is the boy—our son ?

MIRIAM (*in a low voice*)
 Dead

ANTONY °
 Dead ! How long ?

MIRIAM.

Six years

ANTONY

Six years —It was six years ago
 I sailed for Rome He die~~d~~— ?

MIRIAM.

A few weeks after

ANTONY.

They said no child was with you, but I hoped
 That he still lived (Silence)

• Yet it is not my son
 I have been seeking for—a helpless babe,
 Loved only for the arms that held him close,
 The face that bent above him For two years,
 Neglecting duties that I pled at Rome
 As need for my return, forgetting all
 Hopes but this one hope, I have sought for you,
 Till men have deemed me mad—gone mad, they say,
 Because he loved her, the mad Magdalene
 A chance word brought me here—a last, wild hope
 Such words, such hopes, have been my only guides
 Through all these months— (Suddenly)
 Tell me—two years ago
 Were you in Magdala ? °

MIRIAM

Yes

ANTONY

So men said.

You left it suddenly. What brought you here?

MIRIAM

They said you had returned to Galilee

ANTONY (*astounded*)You heard! You knew I sought you! Knew, yet
went!What was it? Anger at a soldier's haste,
The duty that must take us here and there,
With scarce a moment's warning?

Did you think,

When, summoned suddenly, I bade farewell
To you, that afternoon, long years ago,
That I went willingly?

MIRIAM

(with a gesture of dissent, turns and places the
lamp on the table, then faces ANTONY)

Had you returned

After a twelvemonth to Jerusalem
You would, indeed, have found a bitter heart
And mocking laughter. Now—ANTONY (*breaking in*).

Had you no word?

Money I sent, money and messages.

MIRIAM

They did not reach me

ANTONY

So you thought me false !

You still believe—Miriam ! by the Gods !

By all that you hold holy ! by our love !

I swear to you—

MIRIAM (*turning away*)

Not that !

ANTONY

What do you fear ?

MIRIAM

Not that ! Not that ! Listen—and let me speak

You say men called me “ the mad Magdalene ”—

’Twas not your name for me You called me then—

ANTONY

“ The Maid of Magdala ” Can I forget

The peasant maiden on a windy hill

Sun-burned, thyme-scented, laughing as she stretched

Her arms above her head and tried to touch

The soft blue pigeons hurrying to their rest

In the wild valley there below her feet ?

Knowing no other name, I called you then

The Maid of Magdala And when you gave

Your shy young maiden beauty to my love

And calmed the troubled waters of my life

Into wide seas of summer quietness

Where pulsed the strong tides of immortal joy,

You were no wife—a name made drab to me

By fretful constancy ! Like virgin air

A pretty doll of glass that cannot change
Except it worsen, shatter, or grow less—
An arm or finger gone, an ugly crack
Threatening other changes?—I, a man,
Have grown in strength and power. Am I to mourn
The loss of a shy crescent in the west
When suddenly above my darkened life
Rises the golden glory of full moon?

I pled first in the name of our old love,
But in that love there lay the seeds of this
Even as you now stand I have dreamed of you—
Pale, proud, a goddess clouded in dark hair.
Forget the years between Should beauty go
Unworshipped and unused? Men worshipped you—
Can I—one wave of all the swinging tides
That follow on your beauty—cry aloud—
Beat back the rising tide, and cry aloud—
Beseeching you to veil your beauty's light
From all the flooding tide save only me?
Look in my eyes and see your loveliness
Kindling me to madness! My mad Magdalene
My Cleopatra! My wild Eastern queen!

MIRIAM

Antony, never? You must hear me now!—
—The old dream rises like a breath of night
Brushing against barred doors You cannot move me
Look at me once again with clearer eyes.
The flesh is but a dull interpreter
Of the quick life within, if, looking so,
You cannot see the change that bars the doors
. . . How can I tell you, who knew not the Christ,
Jesus of Nazareth?

ANTONY.

The Nazarene !

Head of a dirty rabble of the streets,
 Lepers and beggars, huddled rags, himself
 Crucified and cast out ! I know your lot
 Was thrown with his and that you followed him—
 With other women —Women love a seer
 And follow prating men with gleaming eyes .
 Who swear that they will mould the earth anew,
 While their disciples beg for meat and drink
 From the humane ungodly —There in Rome
 My wife and mother bow and mutter prayers,
 Or veil themselves and creep along dark streets,
 Seeking the priests who swarm from Syria
 And taint our Roman air with sacrifice
 To Cybele, Adonis and Thammuz
 And foul Astarte, the horned queen of heaven
 They follow priests in Rome . and when at last
 I find your door and knock and enter in,
 Trembling to touch your hand—to touch your gown,
 You meet me with this babble of " The Christ,"
 " Jesus of Nazareth "—one crucified—
 Where is the world he promised ? Dead with him

MIRIAM.

Living with Him He died and rose again

ANTONY.

A fable !

MIRIAM

Never ! I have talked with Him
 Four years ag6 I sought His broken body
 Where they had laid it in a garden grave
 The tomb was empty—

ANTONY.

Ha ! A miracle !

Two lusty Galileans in the night
 Bear off a broken body—and a crowd
 Of silly women and rank fishermen
 Proclaim a resurrection.

MIRIAM

Antony !

Wait ! Wait !

(Turning from him)

O Master, give Thy servant strength

How may men learn of Thee if those who lived
 Close at Thy side, saw Thee, heard Thy voice,
 Cannot, with Thy life pulsing through their veins,
 Touch other souls to fire with love of Thee ?

(To ANTONY.)

If suddenly you saw Him at my side
 Would you not then believe ? He came to me
 As I wept in the garden—spoke with me—
 Called me by name—and I who mourned as dead
 One who had brought to life my wasted soul—
 I knew His resurrection—and my own

White tides of light beat on me—I was freed
 From mortal changes and the fear of death.
 Strong-winged, my soul sprang upwards to the
 light
 To lose itself in blinding ecstasy—

(Stopping, half-dazed)

What can I tell you ? That Earth's days go by
 As on a far dim plain—I wait the hoar
 When He shall come again I wait a sign
 Alone, I see Him—

ANTONY.

Dead four years ! You think
 I shall go hungry, then, because a ghost
 Ranges your vision ? Never ! (Seizes her roughly)
 You are mine !

(Kissing her passionately again and again)
 My wine ! My life ! My glory ! Miriam !

(Without a knock the door opens ; the light cowers
 in the wind. An old man's voice, raised in
 prophetic denunciation)

NICOLAS

Blaspheming harlot ! In the name of Christ—

(ANTONY starts and turns. MIRIAM sinks to her
 knees by the table covering her face with her
 hands. The flickering half-light shows, just
 inside the open doorway, the flowing garments
 and long white beard of the deacon NICOLAS,
 and the sallow face and wide eyes of SIMEON,
 peering over his shoulder)

Which Name you sully with your filthiness—
 I cut you off from Christian fellowship
 Henceforward ! Never—

ANTONY (starts forward angrily)

Out of here ! Begone !

(SIMEON shrinks back. The old man stands his
 ground)

NICOLAS

Here in this town, or elsewhere, may you claim
 Kinship with those who follow Christ our Lord
 Your "Friend" ! Your "Master" !—Sleek-tongued
 hypocrite !

(*Spits contemptuously, as he gathers his robes about him to go out ANTONY, seizing his shoulders, pushes him through the doorway*)

ANTONY.

Your white beard saves you—vermin of the street !

(*Slams the door violently. The light, which has been struggling against the wind, goes out in the sudden gust*)

Curse them—the curs ! (Fumbling in the dark)

Is there no bolt ? No key ?

(*The sound of a great key, turning in a rusty lock*)

Malignant friends ! Your Master's following !

(*A woman's sudden sob*)

Miriam, do not weep and break my heart !

(*Making his way across the room in the darkness*)

Wait—I am coming Here !—I touch your hair

Can you not turn to me and trust my love ?

These others cast you off Turn now to me

How I have longed for you ! And you are here !

I cannot leave you now

Ah, Miriam !

I am hungering—

MIRIAM'S VOICE

O Master, give me strength !

(*The MIRACLE takes place In the darkness the alabaster jar on the table grows slowly radiant—a rosy light glowing through its translucence In the first dim light MIRIAM is seen still kneeling before the table—her pale face thrown into relief by the great crimson cloak of ANTONY, who bends above her*)

ANTONY.

What is this sudden fragrance?— (Startled)

This strange light?

(The room is filled with fragrance—delicate, intense. The light grows stronger till it floods the scene with rich, warm colour, transfiguring the face of the Magdalene)

MIRIAM

(in ecstasy, with arms outstretched)

Rabboni! Master! Thou hast come again!

(A long silence. ANTONY gazes in dread at the glowing jar, the centre of this strange glory, then at the rapt face of MIRIAM—radiant, supernatural. At last he turns slowly, and with bowed head crosses the room. The great key sounds again, the wind rushes in. He does not turn or look back. The door closes. MIRIAM, unheeding—her eyes still fixed on the vision—remains motionless)

CURTAIN.

TWO INDIAN PLAYS

By EDWARD THOMPSON

PREFACE

I THE QUEEN OF RUIN

Allah-ud-din, the Afghan Sultan of Delhi, "half-sacked" Chitor in A.D. 1275, seeking possession of Padmani, the Princess of Ceylon, whom the Regent Bhimsi had wedded. He returned in 1290 (so Rajput annals say—but Mohammedan give a date thirteen years later) and wasted it. Altogether Chitor has endured "three and a half sacks", after the last sack, that by Akbar, Udaipur supplanted it as the capital of Mewar. The impression left on Indian imagination by the city's repeated misery is shown by a custom which has lingered to our own day. "Akbar estimated his conquest of Chitor by the quantity of sacred threads taken from the necks of the Rajputs and seventy-four maunds¹ and a half are the recorded amount. To eternize the memory of this disaster the numerals 74½ are accursed. Marked on the banker's letter in Rajasthan it is the strongest of seals, for the sin of the slaughter of Chitor is thereby invoked on all who violate a letter under the safeguard of this mysterious number"². The sign was used in many parts of India, besides Rajasthan, to prevent letters being opened except by their addressees.

The ruins of Chitor cover a plateau of several miles' extent. There is no more moving site in India, none—if we except two or three places famous for their religious associations—more sacred to Hindus or more appealing to the few strangers³ who realize

¹ A maund is about 80 lb.

² Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*

that the stucco prettiness of Udaipur¹ is not the only, or the grandest, beauty of Rajasthan. The jungles are filled with the crying of peacocks, my last glimpse of Chitor was of a magnificent bird who spread his feathers on the highest pinnacle of the superb battlements and lifted his throat to the sun, screaming exultantly. The crumbling temples are the haunt of parrots innumerable, that momently fling themselves, a swift, never-failing succession, against the ledges, their reckless abandon checked as by a miracle as they touch the stone, they cling shrieking, then toss themselves away again. The defences are hardly touched by time, and the Palace of Padmani, after six centuries, still stands beside its lake—spared, tradition says, for Padmani's sake, when Allah-ud-din entered the city he had desolated because of her loveliness. But the stranger will pause longest at the women's bathing-place, a gathering of waters within the deep seclusion of mighty walls. Here through the generations countless women bathed for the last time, before they went to their lords' pyres, in the *Mahasati*² above. In the three sacks of Chitor, the women were all sent into the fire before their menfolk threw themselves on the besiegers, once the burnings were in the open air, but the other times it was in the underground caverns that the women died. The underground corridor—their daily passage-way from palace to pool—into which they went with Padmani to die, is blocked at both ends, and where it emerged to upper air a tangle of snake-infested thorn reinforces the wall that has been built.

¹ I refer to the buildings of Udaipur, not to its lovely lakes and surrounding hills.

² "The Great Place of Faithfulness."

History records other instances of wholesale immolation of itself by a besieged force—at Masada, for example. But it was in the Rajput tradition to plunge to utter despair, this rite of almost complete self-destruction, the *jauhar*, was practised elsewhere in Rajasthan, not only in Chitor. Such courage and such agony have provided the theme of poetry and drama and fiction in every part of India. But, though India is so closely knit to England, these stories have not been taken into our imagination, and even to-day, in spite of Tod, in spite of Kipling's brilliant account of ruined Chitor,¹ for one visitor who goes there probably ten go to Udaipur and a thousand to Benares.

Tradition represents the Guardian Goddess of Chitor as appearing to the Rana and demanding the lives of twelve kings (*ranas*) if the race was to escape extirpation. His nobles refused to believe in so appalling a doom, but she appeared to the full Council and repeated it. Eleven of the Rana's twelve sons in succession assumed sovereignty for three days and then perished in battle, the Rana himself dying as the twelfth victim. The eldest son was saved, and, after the women had gone to the fire, broke through the enemy with a few followers.

In *The Queen of Ruin*, as in my previous Rajput play, *Krishna Kumari*, I have handled tradition very freely. And I have made the Regent Bhimsi the Rana, tradition, representing the Rana, a young man of twenty-five or a little more, as the father of twelve sons of fighting age—though that age is a low one among the Rajputs—strayed into manifest absurdity.

¹ In *Letters of Marque*

THE QUEEN OF RUIN

CHARACTERS

RANA BHIMSI, *Rana of Chitor*

URSI, *his son, but not the son of Padmanî.*

SAMARSI, *a noble, commander of the Rajput forces.*

PRIEST OF KALI.

PADMANÎ, *Rani of Chitor.*

THE GODDESS KALI.

KAMALA, *youngest wife of Ursi; a girl of ten or less.*

• THE QUEEN OF RUIN

Chorus. The great hall of the RANA's palace, opening through vast granite pillars on to the plateau—at the back of the stage To left and right doors leading to rooms. Against the right-hand pillar a large mirror of steel, brightly polished. Lamps hang from the roof. It is close on midnight.

The RANA, his eldest son URSI, and the PRIEST OF KALI The RANA is a man of about forty, URSI, the first-born of his twelve sons, twenty or twenty-one. The PRIEST carries a skull at his waist, and is matted-haired and almost naked, the others are in mail, bristling with weapons.

PRIEST

Stand from this self that dreams I am her priest,
And say she would not come so

•
RANA

Would a dream
Clashingly-weaponed through the lamplight stalk ? ~
Halt, frown, and question ? Answer me again ?
Wait for my silence or assenting word ?
Pause with slow turn upon its heel, and glare ?

PRIEST

You should have pressed this cheating spectre home
With challenge By her sacred name of Mother
Why did you not assail her ? She had then
Shrunk from her borrowed semblance, and in fire,
A demon, vanished

RANA (*wearily*)

So she did In fire
That yet burns in my brain.

PRIEST.

You should have said—

RANA

Peace! Peace! O wise in face of fate!
All that your wit devises now I said
I taunted her; I fronted her, and cried.
"When was it heard a Mother slew her sons?
What Mother ever drained the life she gave?"
In those vast eyes no pity lightened, none
Inexorable, she put petition by
As Death puts prayers

SAMARSI

(*He has entered during the RANA's last words, and
speaks excitedly.*)

As Death has put our prayer!
We must withdraw within our nearer gates,
Being too few to hold the outer wall

RANA

So few, our Mother scorns to drink our lives
Without the spice of royalty in the bowl

(*To SAMARSI*)

Summoned to council of this Thing I saw,
What comfort bring you?

SAMARSI

This, that doom is here—
Couched on the hill-side like a beast of prey,
And at our gates a watcher As I came,

There seemed some Fate that prowled without these
 , hall;

The doors are deathly with its unseen shadow;
Its breath was on me now, a wind that crept
Along the corridors

RANA

Why, I have seen her!

We have spoken face to face She has drawn in
Our foes more closely than a fisher's mesh,
And grips them in her fingers as a knife
To slit the victim's throat In the dim night
I have seen her watchful eyes in their low fires
They sleep, she sleeps not, and in the black hour
She passed our sightless sentries till she strode
Clangingly to my couch of rest, and stood
Where the lamp's flicker glared within her eyes,
Then spake. Twelve kings must die

URSI

Priest, thou hast heard

PRIEST.

Ay, of a vision? Overwrought, our Lord
Dreamt between sleep and waking

RANA

Give! she cri

Give! give! or to the dust
Our city's glory sinks for evermore
No name, no relic from our blood shall live,
No sons¹ shall keep our rites from age to age

SAMARSI.

A death beyond this death ! A gulf !
 Of bitterness unending !

RANA (*despairingly*)

In this cloud

No star appears, and we must tread the road
 Her crimson torch flames on

URSI.

Would she were here, our Lady Padmani !

PRIEST

Her beauty has moved our Guardian Queen to rage ;
 Priest of the Goddess whose tiara is
 Our battlemented city—

URSI

(*dreamingly—he ignores the PRIEST while seeming to answer him*)

Yes, but she

Has been herself our city through these years.
 Her loveliness has been our city's praise,
 Its shield her wisdom

RANA (*to the PRIEST*)

Of your Goddess now
 Our hearts are emptied Well we know her will !
 'Tis you alone that doubt !

URSI

Only we wait to know
 How to our lady seems this doom, the word
 The Goddess brings, walking our halls by night.

(*A sound without, as of a wind blowing up and moaning; the sullen ring of armour and the slow stamp of giant feet in the corridors. The men grow pale, and look at each other*)

Still wilt thou question that my father saw?

These halls are haunted yet Will she break in?

Listen!

—(*The sounds are nearer, the steps more deliberate*)

RANA

The Powers that rule the world are hungry ever,
But this is famine!

PADMANI

When have they fasted?

(*This is that Padmani for whom has been waged a twenty years' war, and because of whose beauty, a legend which is to burn in the Indian imagination for ever, doom has drawn its net closely round Chitor. Her loveliness is shining, like that of the lotus which is her name, her eyes are dark as the pools in which it grows, her hair is the summer rain-cloud that feeds it. Twenty years of suffering, and of expectation of suffering, have passed since she left her home in wooded Ceylon, and came to be queen of this rock in the desert. They have left no mark upon her beauty, no sign but a mist on the fire of her deep eyes. She is the lotus still, but by moonlight now and not in clear dawning. She has entered, unobserved, from the inner chambers, and all eyes are hers*)

RANA.

Never!

Theirs is a hunger that still feeds itself.
 Queen, let your speech now strike beside my own,
 And tell this Brahmin that our sun has set.

URSI

She is the Moon whose loveliness has drawn
 The night about us. Leave thy thoughts, and see
 This sorrow through her eyes

PRIEST

I am the priest—

RANA (*turning with impatience*)

Would any father feign a dream that slew
 His sons—such sons as mine?

PRIEST.

Ask, would she call

For such a sacrifice as laid us waste?

PADMANI

What has she done through all the years but call
 For slaughter, still for slaughter? While our veins
 Hold blood to spill, she will be clamorous
 In my own land the Gods are merciful,
 We pile their altars deep with flowers, no stain
 Of crimson foul their petals, and the air
 Is sweet that fills our shrines, our women there
 Pass from a laughing youth to motherhood
 Still smiling, and to age serene and calm,
 Nor ever yield their trembling bodies up
 To the fire's torture.

PRIEST (*indignant*)

They are not chaste like ours !
 They do not follow their dead lords in death !

PADMANI

Your pardon, Brahmin ! Here you do us honour,
 Great honour—in the way your Gods command
 But we are happier there

(*Turning to the RANA and holding out her hands*)
 O my dear lord !

Forgive me if my eyes a moment blurred,
 Remembering my sweet land of groves and flowers,
 Of bloodless sacrifice and simple death
 In these lion-haunted rocks God made my home,
 And in your lion-heart, Sesodia Chief,
 I would not change, though down my days has sounded
 One note, the hungry throb of funeral drums,
 And though from twenty years of storm I pass
 To the last tempest ! Grief has grown a thing
 Native and homely, I am a mid-sea rock
 So many' waves have lapt that now it heeds
 Fury and calm alike

(*To the PRIEST*)

I know your Gods—

Pitiless ! I have seen this city fall
 Under a misery that had pacified
 A hatred that was less than infinite

PRIEST

You wrong our Queen of Ruin ! 'Tis her love,
 And not her rancour, that is infinite

PADMANI

Brahmin, I speak of deeds no words could wrong

Unsatisfied, through twenty years our fate
Has prowled upon our lives It springs at last

PRIEST.

The Mother would not call for sacrifice
Such as the Rana dreams !

PADMANI

Lay that word by !

I am a woman, and I know her mind—
Its love, its cruelty—a woman's love
Which sees our city crowned with burning fame,
In all its generations but one form,
That form her bridegroom's ! And to make her own
The splendour which has lit her baleful eyes,
She heeds not that a generation go,
That women anguish or that children die
Before her lust of praise our wretchedness
Is less than nothing—from this vanity
Deep in the universe, the vanity
And cruelty of women have their being.

PRIEST (*doubtful and scornful*)

In your own land the Gods were merciful ?

PADMANI

Yes For they neighboured one whose spirit shamed
Their hatred, till they turned towards men a face
Pitiful as Siddhartha's own

PRIEST (*angry and scandalized*)

The Accurst !

The juggling cheat whose shape Narayan took,
To lure blind fools by sophistries astray !

PADMANI (*contemptuously*)

It may be so He won their hearts by love
 This Queen of Dread for whom Chitor laid waste
 Twice in a score of years will not suffice,
 So that she howls for richer banquet yet,
 There slakes her famine with the blood of goats

o

SAMARSI

Yet, Lady, when he speaks for her, and says
 The Rana dreams a hunger is not hers,
 Him, though her priest, you heed not

PADMANI

, For her way

She has made clear to all, that all may read.
 Her torches have been blazing homes, her hymns
 Agonies and the screams of dying men,
 Her flowers of sacrifice the living death
 A girl bears when she first thinks of the pyre.
 Not you, priest, no, nor any other can say
 A word to overset the thing we know
 Those are her priests, who haunt the charnel-ground—
 Not you who love us—matted things that use
 Skulls for their cups, and feast on human blood !
 Year after year this doom has crept more close,
 Its hot breath burns upon our throats at last

(*She pauses, drawn up to her full height, fronting
 the great hall-door—her hands clenched, her
 voice trembling She continues*)

As for this Hate that walks in human ways,
 Calls Itself God, is God, since It rules,
 Would I might front It, and with woman's faith
 Beat woman's cruelty down ! But It walks veiled,
 And drives us huddling to our blindfold end.

PRIEST.

Such thoughts as these have drawn her anger down !
 Thoughts that no lips have dared to speak before !
 She is the secret Mind in every mind, !
 She knows our thoughts unspoken

(The walls tremble with clash and sound of mailed steps outside)

She hears, she hears !

These corridors shake to her clanging tread !
 You have uttered treason to her listening ears !

PADMANI

Why, if that Demon-Guilt dare burst within,
 She shall know all our mind ! There is no fear !
 She has no thunder that she has not hurled,
 There is no misery that she has not sent
 Flatter the tigress, Brahmin ? In her teeth
 Fling our defiance, though useless, and then die !

(The men huddle in terror at her words, and watch the entrance)

PRIEST (grovelling on his face) .

Goddess ! Chandī ! Mother of the World !
 Thou shalt have blood ! have all that thou canst drink !
 Not blood of goats alone—horses, and men,
 Men, men ! each slave and beast yithin our walls !

PADMANI

Then should we like our Gods be tyrannous,
 Not princely givers like ourselves ! Nay, rather,
 Scorn this Dark Queen 3 by flinging down the thing
 She ravens through the generations for
 What ! you believe at last my lord has seen !
 That rumble of *Ashar's* 4 tempest is her tread !
 That moaning wind her voice !

PRIEST

She has read your heart
 Blaspheming, and your hateful speech has heard

PADMANI.

Well, she has heard it, then ! She that has fed
 On anguish through a hundred thousand years—
 Comes she to gorge on any other meat ?

PRIEST

With blood of myriad goats and buffaloes
 I have drenched her altars Were it worthless lives,
 As slaves and common fighters, I would pay them,
 Nor question make But our own selves is that
 She cannot ask, knowing we could not give !

PADMANI

Brahmin, we made this Hunger , now, grown Famine,
 It is for us it prowls We freely fed it
 With miseries that were tense as ours, with pangs
 That we held cheap, since other bodies bore them
 Had we but walked the path of harmlessness,⁵
 It had not learnt from us that blood is sweet

SAMARSI

Lady, your words but more incense our fate
 Yet now I know the Rana's dream no dream

URSI (*who has been silent—coming forward*)

I am the first of those for whom she calls,
 And like her warrior will stride up to her
 Now shall the drums for the new Rana throb,
 While from this crumbling realm I lead the way.

(*He turns to PADMANI.*)

Princess, before you came our flinty crags
 Nursed lions only ; with your coming fame
 Flung softer clouds about us, flowers shone out,
 And lightnings garlanded the singing rain,
 Though not my mother, mother of my race,
 Lady, Farewell !

RANA

What talk is this of Rana ? I am Rana.

URSI

Sir, in our reverence you are Rana still—
 Within these walls still Rana But without
 Doom waits for me, a victim , and I go,
 Lest, breaking in, it seize your nobler life.

RANA

I lead our ranks ; Ursi my son will follow

PADMANI

Lion of the Rajputs, let his judgment be
 The wisdom years and grief have lodged in' you
 We hoard till last ; so in our death-spring shall
 Our foe taste deep of the one woe with us

RANA

Me the Goddess summoned

PADMANI

And in you

Her word shall find fulfilment We will pay
 Royally this demand our Gods enforce,
 Giving our noblest last, that they may see
 We have no more to give, the cup is dry

(She turns to URSI)

Yet shall our first be noble, be a gift
 Worthy from us to Goodness Infinite,
 Yet such as Goodness that⁶ was Infinite
 Would touch and then lay by,⁶ for mortal use
 My son, that crav'st my blessing ! Rather, see
 Me seek forgiveness ! Yes, from you, my lord—
 You, Brahmin—you, Samarsi ! I am she
 Whose•body men have praised for being fair,
 And made of me a moon of wretchedness,
 Dragging against your peaceful shores these tides
 Of demon-lust and fury ! Once again
 They swell with hissing fangs and crests of fire ,
 My beauty and my misery draw them back

URSI

We have been happy to have known a glory
 No realm can share from us , a loveliness
 Has dwelt among us that has maddened men,
 And yet toward us it turned a mother's face

PADMANI

What curse against you triumphed in my birth ?
 Oh, had I not been born !

URSI.

Then had our years
 Gone darkened by, that have been bright with yo

SAMARSI

Reason enough, Lady, that you were born !
 All Hindusthan has been a lake to glass
 The lotus of your beauty !

PADMANI

I have been

A fire of funeral raging in your peace !
 A beacon on your hills, that lit your foes,
 In arms to slay you ! I shall live a name
 Accurst for ever !

URSI.

Blessed, if our sons
 Keep memory of the way their fathers thought !
 O lightning in our clouds of dream ! This woe
 Is passing, even while we bleed with it
 It will be nothing while the ages last,
 The flashing glory of our pride remains
 Lo, I first vanish, but the gulf is deep,
 And will take all We are a song, a tale
 Told in the shadows, thus and thus they did,
 But it was long ago, so long that now.
 No man for thrice a thousand years has known
 Where lay their bones

PADMANI (*touching his brows*)

My son ! May thy death fall
 Lightly, unseen, amid the clashing spears !

URSI

No other royalty my place demands
 But this our mother's touch Yet, for due rites,
 Be my brows in Her Temple marked, and there
 My name accepted, ere our foes in me
 Learn first how in his death the tiger springs
 (*The men go out, leaving PADMANI alone Silence*
 Then, as she sits gazing at the lamps burning
 before the pillar, she speaks)

PADMANI

The lamp is smouldering And the oil sinks low.
 And we are shadows This our misery is
 Gesticulation leaping on a wall

(She is silent, gazing past the lamps, into the stretching darkness beyond, the hall She speaks again)

I am a God who looks abroad and sees
 A mountain clad with forest and with field
 Within that grove the tiger tears the fawn ;
 Through that wet marish glides the snake in prey ;
 Yet all but as one sleeping peace appears,
 Here bright with sun, there beautiful with shade
 There is no suffering, none ! Ursi has gone ,
 He has walked out from life as from a room ;
 The darkness waits for him , and for him soon
 There are not even dreams
 Ah, but if I were God, should I not see
 How under all my peace a misery lurked,
 Poisoning the sweetness of my sun-washed air ?

(A giant tread The lamps shake PADMANI looks up, and between the vast columns sees the GUARDIAN GODDESS of Chitor In her mighty hand KALI holds a spear, and her brows are coroneted with towers and battlements, the image of the city that worships her She is wearing a garland of skulls, and her zone is made of the heads and hands of little children PADMANI springs erect, and confronts her, defiant)

KALI

I am hungry !

PADMANI

Thou hast slain our city twice,
 Yet famished still ! Day following day, the pyre,
 And all day long, has for our bravest burned
 Stand on our battlements, and see them now,
 Our city's flaring tresses ! Night has no stars ;
 Chitor has lit her blackness

*(There is no gleam of pity in those bright eyes,
 hardly even intelligence. Only hunger, instinct ablaze and merciless, looks out)*

KALI.

I am hungry !

PADMANI

Feed !

Maw whom our weakness worships, since it must !
 Ignoble hunger, shambling in a world
 Sullenly smouldering in hate of thee !
 Hyena-gaited ! Queen of jackal fears !
 Feed, feed, since thou hast no other function !
 Cram ! Goddess ! Guardian ! Mother of Chitor !
 Hungry ! *(She laughs in her bitterness)*

Eight thousand of my kin were late
 An offering to thee !

KALI

What is it to me

If many thousand common fighters bleed ?
 I must have royal blood Twelve kings must die

PADMANI

Be satiate, Monster ! Blood you crave ! 'Tis yours,
 Down your gulf of ravin flung like draf
 We pitch to swine, those trampling mouths we loathe !
 Brute Cruelty, you shall hate me ! Only those

Who do not know you dread you, think to move
 Pity by cringing ! None the less they die,
 Praising you with trapped hearts and bitter lips !

(Sullenly)

I know my fate is fixed You can do nothing
 More than the misery that is your will

KALI

(*A spark of satisfied malice slowly lights up the dark features*)

Art thou the Queen for whom these armies clash ?
 The Lotus of this battle ?

PADMANI

I am she

This Afghan thief to spoil my city came,
 But many valiant spears denied me to him
 So at the last he prayed,
 Might he but once set eyes on Padmani,
 And so . . . go satisfied Magnanimous,
 My lord in his great heart bade him draw near ,
 And in this hall before that steel he stood
 And gazed on its bright depth till I went by
 Behind him

(*She throws her glorious hair back proudly*)

From my face my veil I flung,
 And the keen metal in his vision threw
 My loveliness, a meteor, ere it passed
 That glimpse through twenty years has burned his
 heart,

While over Hindusthan he ranged, and fought
 All kingship to his service . . . save our own
 Now with all India gathered to his aid
 With arms invincible he bends his life
 To set within his crest that star once seen

KALI

Thou wast that loveliest face ?

PADMANI

I was. I am.

KALI (*exulting*)How will that beauty in the funeral-flame
Tarnish, when smoke shall burst in clouds thy way !

PADMANI.

Since we serve Gods pitiless, Powers that kill
But cannot save !

KALI

This city^t thee, not Me,
Has worshipped ! In the name of Padmani
Exulted—not in Me, its Battle-Queen !(She clashes her spear terribly on the ground, and
her voice swells to a roar)I am the Tempest that their folly forgot,
Turning to watch the beauty of a day
So I crush down the flower, I crumple itPADMANI (*pleading*)

Had you a mind, as you have given us mind,

(She pauses She wonders in her anguish, half
wonders, to what she is speaking To this
Brute Malice ? No ! ! ! But she continues)You would be hurt with sorrow, seeing our lives
We have fanning winds, and sunlight making warm
Delicious languor in our limbs, the cold
Of winter's first slant rays on the red *sal*
Strikes gloriously, a stirring after sleep,
And our delighted bodies feel its breath

We have swift spirits—eyes which beauty makes
Full of all dancing ecstasies, our joy
Grows clamorous towards a spring when it shall
blossom

We are fulfilled of happiness, in love
Of parents, brothers, sisters, husband, sons
But anguish ever lies in wait for us
Disease, and the slow impotence of age;
And separation, falling early and late
I have borne children for the burning-place,
And decked my living daughter for the pyre
There is no moment I have said, "I stand!
My happiness is poised above despair!"
Is't not enough that we must suffer thus,
Sword-pierced at first or last? Why have you made
One race your prey? You have revelled in our blood,
Eternal Tigress! Battle and flame have been
Thy grace to us! Are these a Mother's love?
Plague, not Mother of the Sesodia race!

KALI

(Her voice sounds strangely alien, as though it were almost something not herself, trying to explain herself. The words fall slowly, pausingly, as from a depth beyond herself)

This malice that I am is not Myself.
In all the universe, were man not here,
There is not that unbounded hate and hunger
I feel within Myself I am man's hate
He has built up this evil in the world
And poured this poison into Nature's veins
The Powers that rule you are not good—not bad
They portion bliss and woe indifferently
Each as his lot may fall, receives the same

(Her sentences fall monotonously, as though given to her)

Though we strike down, there is no hate. But man,
 Man with his cruelty and evil deeds,
 Has made us evil. Age to age has rolled
 This tide of passionate wrong that now must burst
 For every evil deed must walk the world,
 Till misery glut it to forgetfulness.
 I am Sin's Sword.
 I am Time?
 I am Man.

PADMANI

Twelve kings must die?

KALI.

For madness like a wave

Has ranged a thousand leagues of swelling sea
 It has grown dark and strong with wings of cloud,
 You are the shore that it must burst upon

(In the distance the roll and throb of the vast kettledrums,⁸ proclaiming that RANA URSI is going out from the citadel)

This rancour that must send to endless battle
 The sons you love—lacking an alien foe,
 To faction 'mong yourselves—the pride which wills
 Torture and death must prove what constancy
 Your women bear such lords, mere boys whose life
 Is endless quarrel—these have grown so great
 You shall have what you crave, be stuffed and crammed
 With glory, till the world shall sicken with it!
 Had you been forest-folk, who loved the dawn
 And evening's quiet ways, and pasturing peace,

Unboasting of the happiness you knew,
 Then, women that were fair as Padmani
 And men more worthy than your warriors here,
 Unharmed you might have lived and died But now
 Twelve kings must die—kings, that their dying drag
 Contending myriads down—kings, that their death
 Be rich with many women's agony.

PADMANI

Is there no corner of this God-cursed world
 Where hatred does not reign ? Is there no Power,
 Not God, not man, more merciful than these,
 And nobler, who has pity on all that breathes ?
 With whom a mother might speak face to face
 And utter all her heart of yearning love,
 And not be shamed by brute, unanswering eyes ?
 Speak, Puppet ! Thou shalt tell me ! I will wring
 Some message from the Mind that sent thee forth
 To thy permitted mischief ! I am heard
 By That to which *thou* art but a mouth and hands !

KALI

I know not. I am but the Will that strikes.

PADMANI

There is a Will beyond thee ? God ?

(*With revulsion*)
 • Not God !

I will not call that God which has no power,
 Which cannot save from pain the world it made !
 But is there Love ? Love—though weak, still Love ?

KALI (*her words stumbling and ashamed*)
It may be that some day that God will rule.

PADMANI

Dwells he where any prayer can reach?

KALI

I know not
I am but Hunger. I have dogged thy ways
Thy loveliness is fuel I feed this fire
With lilies

(*Her voice is a menace again, her features dully malignant*)

I am Time's gardener, and I burn
This age like weeds, and in the furnace toss
Mother and child alike, and fat the smoke
With women's beauty In these moments here
I have snuffed royal blood! Now in my throat
It rises! I shall drink deep!
My kings come toward Me!

(*With clash and thudding tread she is gone Wailing without KAMALA, the youngest wife of RANA URSI, enters—a girl beside herself with terror and wretchedness*)

PADMANI

My son?

KAMALA.

Is dead They light our pyre at dawn
Mother! (She flings herself down, weeping)

PADMANI

Thou fear'st it, child?

KAMALA

Mother, my heart

Is filled with shrieking 'Mother, I am a child

PADMANI

*(Her face is hard, but not towards KAMALA
She is not thinking of KAMALA)*

Not Childhood saves our race from agony
 We have sent babes into the funeral-fire
 Thou wast in his house
 His chattels swell his death-pomp No true wife
 Lives when her lord is dead She is a corpse
 Waiting the touch of the consuming flame

KAMALA

I shall not face it ! I shall die with fear

PADMANI

Do, if thou canst There is no death so hard
 We can feel fear, but may not die with it
 There was a testing-time ere man was made—
 For woman yet another ! Our substance first
 Was proven capable of wrongs so great
 That any other beast would die with them
 But this endured Then we were sent to live.

KAMALA

Give poison, Mother !

*(She lies, miserable, at PADMANI's feet PADMANI
bends to raise her That tenderness which
has made her, the child of a gentler, kinder
race, a mother to these barbarian clans, takes
possession of her)*

PADMANI.

Child, thou shalt not die!
 I will have pity, though the Gods have none.
 Stay with me here

KAMALA (*raising her head in terror, to listen*)

They come ! to drag me hence !

PADMANI.

Listen ! Each one of all of us must die
 This is the fire that ends the age ; its flames
 Roar hither—hear them ! through these crumbling
 days

They ravage and roar for prey !

(*She listens to the drumming and keen of flutes*
From the recesses of the palace comes a wailing
of women The death-sorrow for RANA URSI
has begun)

Howl ! howl ! and sweep deliverance to this cage !
 By agony from agony set us free !

(To KAMALA)

A week . . . a month . . . and death will reach us all
 Then after we are dead our lords will die
 When all of us shall walk to that last fire
 Will you not walk with me ?

KAMALA

Mother, I will.

And you will cast around my wretchedness
 Your love that saves us all So fear will die.

(SAMARSI enters)

SAMARSI

Lady, the first of our doomed lords has gone
 Unto the mansions of the Sun our sire ?

PADMANI

How died my son ?

SAMARSI

His carpet was the slain—
 A prince his pillow ; so he laid him down,
 Weary, the reaper of the field of death.
 The rest of us but gleaned behind his steps
 How further speak of him who left no foe
 To dread or praise him ?

PADMANI

So . . . my blessing found him
 And it was morning with him when night came

SAMARSI

Even as the drums died down, that told our foe
 That Rana Ursi came without our walls,
 He burst their nets, and through the gates of death
 Cleft his wide way His shout of victory
 Down the dark lane wherethrough, a storm, he swept,
 Echoing, and echoing, and echoing, goes yet
 His body where we may not reach it lies,
 But with the morning rays his women go
 To serve him in the shining House of Light
 All honour that is meet we pay to him,
 To Mewar's martyr-chief

(*He catches sight of KAMALA, and addresses her sternly*)

What dost thou here ?

Thy place is with the women who prepare
 To do their latest worship to their lord
 Begone !

(*He points within the palace*)

PADMANI

I have thrust this doom from her ; and I
Am Padmani.

SAMARSI.

This woman——

PADMANI (*softly*)

Yes ? This child
As my handmaiden waits till I shall die

SAMARSI

Dishonouring him ! A Rajput wife unchaste !
Now for the fire they deck themselves, and smear
Their brows with the red-hue of faithfulness
(*The GIRL cowers like a beaten hound ; but PADMANI
steps scurifly in front of her*)

PADMANI

I have said, she goes not now. I shall die soon ;
And when amid the spiring flames I wait,
This child shall sit by me

(*She grows rapt, and the death-vision unfolds in
her mind and in her words*)

The day draws on,

When, where the waters gather, ere they fall
In swift leap toward the plain and, dazzling white,
Shear the green cliff as with a silver knife,
We shall together come, a silent band—
No more with laughing speech and plashing limbs
In the cool, singing brook that laps us round,
But solemn in that ecstasy of dying,
To cleanse and deck our bodies for the fire.
Then, where the furnace of deliverance burns

Deep-glowing in the dens that vault Chitor,
 We shall descend—the mother with her babe,
 Youth and the shaking steps of hapless age
 Our lords, in saffron ¹⁰ robes for the last strife,
 Shall stand without and shut the doors of light
 Upon the brides of the devouring cave,
 And from the memory and the thought shall turn
 Like tempest on the foe That hour shall sweep
 All knowledge of our pain from minds of men !
 Our love, our happiness, our misery
 Into the noontide of one day shall fade,
 Like mist into the sun And we shall be
 A legend—glory—boasting to our sons—
 We that had bodies quick with mad delight
 Or stabbed with agony—and no man know
 Our thought for evermore

(She is silent Then she lifts her arms in supplication to the Sun, the Light-Bringer and the Father of the Race of Chitor, and she prays to him hidden in the darkness beyond the granite pillars, where the Earth spins in the mists of night, turning and turning till it finds his face)

O Day, be swift !

Day that shall bring me death, thy longed-for gift !
 O Day desired, O prayed-for, nightly-implored,
 With tears and speechless miseries adored,
 Run up to me impatient for the gleam
 Of thy white chariot ! As a thought, a dream,
 Slide through these minutes ! Let me lay this dress
 Aside, of thought and bitter consciousness !
 Come, Day ! Deliverer ! Blessed Noon, when I
 Dust amid dust, ashes in blackness, lie !

•
THE CLOUDED MIRROR

CHARACTERS

THE KING OF VISHNUPUR

KRISHNACHARAN BHATTACHARYA, *Priest*,

RADHAGOBINDA SINGH, *Commander of the Vishnupur Army*

SANNYASI

THE QUEEN OF VISHNUPUR

SUBHASINI

TARA BIBI

SOLDIERS, ATTENDANTS, ETC

The period is 1707, the place Vishnupur, a small independent Hindu kingdom in Upper Bengal

THE CLOUDED MIRROR

The QUEEN's garden In the centre a circular platform of masonry, rising about eighteen inches above the ground On it mats and cushions, and a low table with fruits and sweetmeats

Behind the platform the bushes and trees of the garden In the front rank dwarf bushes of belā (Arabian jasmine), sprinkled with a few early blossoms, above them luxuriant rose-bushes in heavy bloom, overhung by the creamy-yellow flowers of frangipani and the polished green and scarlet of pomegranate thickets Still higher, and beyond these, feathery nim-trees, and palās, lifting a hedge of crowded brick-red blossoms These last are ranged along the low stone wall that, barely seen through gaps in the garden bushes, separates the garden from the high road leading into Vishnupur Through the gaps are caught glimpses of a spreading landscape—bare, terraced ricefields, stretching toward the afterglow of sunset.

To the right, over a low parapet that crowns the garden terrace, a view unobstructed by trees or bushes—a great lake, with a high embankment on its farther side, on which are lofty simul, glorious with huge scarlet flowers On the nearer side of the lake rise several temples, in groves of heavy, spreading trees, mangoes and banyans

A high wall slants diagonally across the left of the stage. In it are two doorways—the farther one a wide archway which, when open, shows the palace courtyard, flanked by irregular rambling buildings; the nearer one a small gate, leading directly into the private apartments of the QUEEN

The Queen is reclining against cushions SUBHASINI
enters, bearing a tray of perfumes, which she sets down.

QUEEN

Why do you poison evening with these scents ?
 Take them away

SUBHASINI

The King has sent you them ,
 Brought from your native Rajasthan—so rare ,
 Only the King could give so rich a gift .

QUEEN

Subha, they pain my heart with memories
 Why should he send them now ? They shall not stay

*(Rising, she steps down from the platform Going
 to the right, but not up to the parapet, she
 looks out over the landscape* SUBHA puts the
tray on one side)

We have nobler essences—the gracious clouds
 Falling all day from the white-towered *sal*
Phalgun now walks our woods in festival ,
 And in this mid-poise of the spring-tide meet
 All fragrances , late-flowering mango blends
 With *siris* and the breath of wakening *neem*

SUBHASINI

Will you not go within ? The west grows white

QUEEN.

No , let me stand and watch the forest-miles
 Ablaze with crowding *palas* and the glow
 Of scarlet *simul* thrusting into heaven

SUBHASINI.

The King beseeches you to go within ;
 The damp mists from our lakes are poisonous

QUEEN

I will not go within , there my brain burns
 I shall go mad, go mad, within those walls
 Here I can walk , and dream of Rajasthan—
 We had an island-garden there, aflame
 With red hibiscus and pomegranate-brakes
 Near to my home the Great God ¹ had a shrine ;
 There oleanders cleft a crimson way
 To the hill's fiery crest, where, spring by spring,
 A thousand *simuls* flowered, so massed, so close,
 It seemed the skies burned with the Great God's
 coming.

And I remember how, a child, I thought
 That I should surely see him walking there

(*To herself*)

That was before I came to be a Queen

(*A great noise is heard, of drums and flutes , and,
 above the instruments, the voices of women,
 uttering their auspicious cry of Ulu, ulu* The
 QUEEN steps forward to a gap in the rose-
 bushes)

But look—what pageant moves ? Some wedding-
 throng

With cries auspicious—*ulu, ulu*—hear !
 Listen !

SUBHA

That is no wedding-throng

QUEEN..

What is it ?

SUBHA

Raja = Debsingh to-day of fever died.
It is his widow in procession goes,
To burn with him.

(*The procession is passing the garden now, and in the noise can be distinguished shouts of "Blessed Sati!"*) 3

QUEEN.

A faithful wife But tell me,
Are there no faithful husbands? Is there one
Would lose a little finger for his wife?

SUBHA.

Our Scriptures nowhere issue such commands

QUEEN.

No; they were written by men

(*A maid-servant enters*)

SERVANT.

Madam, the King
Grieves that you linger in these treacherous airs.
He begs you go within, nor tempt them more.

QUEEN.

Say to my lord, my home at Udaipur
Was ringed with vaster lakes, and more than these.
I thank him for his care, but here, without,
I take no harm. Assure his fears Begone.

(*As the SERVANT goes the QUEEN's attention is attracted by the sound of voices. She looks towards the courtyard*)

What splendour in the courtyard halts ? And whose
That,gilded palanquin ?

•

SUBHA

I do not know.

QUEEN

Go , bid the lady, whosoe'er she be
That peacocks in my sight, come to me straight

SUBHA

Madam—

•

QUEEN

I have said Be swift

SUBHA

If she refuse—

QUEEN

Refuse ? Am I the Queen in Vishnupur ?

(SUBHA goes to the courtyard in haste, while the QUEEN continues to gaze intently There is the sound of a momentary altercation, then a peal of laughter SUBHA returns, and behind her is a Moslem woman, heavily veiled and still more heavily hung with anklets and bangles, that clatter as she walks She is not so tall as the QUEEN, but younger, and she moves in a lively and vivacious manner)

SUBHA.

She comes

QUEEN

A Musalmani !

SUBHA (*shrugging her shoulders*)
So it seems.

QUEEN

A Musalmani ! Ask her if she knows
This is the palace !SUBHA (*deprecating the question*)
Madam, be sure she knows

QUEEN

How ! Do the women of our officers
Seek out their masters thus, and go unwhipped ?
Summon the captain of my guard.

SUBHA.

"Twere best,

Madam, that you should speak with her

QUEEN

○ ○
You know her ?SUBHA (*defensively*).

All Vishnupur knows well

QUEEN

I do not know
Mistress, I'll have that veil down

THE MUSALMANI

(throwing her veil back defiantly)

Willingly

(She is seen to be a woman of about twenty, with a mass of coal-black hair and dark, full-blooded, glowing features. She stares at the QUEEN insolently.)

QUEEN.

Your master, whosoe'er he be, has eyes
 That know to judge Your beauty lacks no crown
 But modesty.

THE MUSALMANI (*with mocking humility*)

That crown the Queen has kept,
 A gem too precious for her slave to wear.

QUEEN

You are impudent You think your master great !
 So great, his creature dares to taunt a Queen !
 Yet you may be mistaken Think again—
 Is he so great as that ?

THE MUSALMANI (*bowing*)

The Queen should know

QUEEN

I know ! Again ! Who are you ?

THE MUSALMANI

Can it be

The great Queen, last of all her realm, must ask ?
 Men call me *Tara Bibi* .

QUEEN

And you *dare*

Stand face to face with me!

THE MUSALMANI.

You called me here

I did not come for you

QUEEN.

You sought *him* here!

You! who have drawn him nightly from my bed!

You! you! to seek him at my doors!

(She turns to SUBHA)

Quick, girl!

Summon the captain of my guard! Make haste!

THE MUSALMANI

(mocking her imperious tones and manner)

Summon him! Swiftly!

(SUBHA goes out. THE MUSALMANI turns to the
QUEEN)

May your servant know

Your business with this man?

QUEEN

Yes, you shall know.

This—that he send you lashed and bleeding hence

THE MUSALMANI

So, for my beauty, which has dimmed your star,

You thus revenge your impotence of hate!

Men will sing ballads of our Rajput Queen,

Will in our streets tell of a King whose love

Forsook the waning beauty at his side,

Following to worship of a face seen once,
 One in a sea of myriad upturned faces,¹
 And sought until he found his rapture there.
 Then, for the Rajput hate that rose in her,
 The Queen called in the ruffians of her guard
 And maimed the delicate form that mocked her own
 So, when your pious mobs with songs obscene
 Laud² their lewd idols, flinging in our streets
 Their swirl of foul, red waters,³ one will shout
 " *Madhab, The Wronged Wife's Vengeance* "—look!
 with leer

Up steps your ballad-singer, while the crowd
 Clap time and sway with laughter!

(SUBHA *returns, with the CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD*)

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

Madam, I come.

QUEEN

I did not Get you gone

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

Madam, your maid said—

QUEEN

Subha is a fool

I did not send for you Leave us alone,
 And, Subha, go until I call you back.

(SUBHA *and the CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD go out*)

Mistress, we will have further speech,

THE MUSALMANI

That scourge?

QUEEN (*angrily*)

Can wait.

THE MUSALMANI

The Queen does well Her lord would think
A bleeding body ill became his bed.

QUEEN.

Answer ; and you shall go unstricken hence

THE MUSALMANI.

And if I will not answer ?

QUEEN.

Woman, tell me,
How dared you in his palace seek the King ?

THE MUSALMANI

They whom the King commands dare anything
His word is shield

QUEEN.

The King commanded you ?

THE MUSALMANI

As he commands us all. He sent for me
Come, sister, you and I must needs be friends

(*She laughs*)

The last of all your realm to know ! To-morrow
My carpenters and masons will be here,
And they shall build my house as I direct
You shall advise me lay my gardens out,
Sister, I am not used to being a Queen

QUEEN

Say that you jest! The King has called you here,
A Musalmani!

THE MUSALMANI

Keep your private shrine
My mosque shall not affront it, It shall be
Where you desire.

QUEEN

Your mosque shall be in Hell!

(*Then her voice becomes pleading*)

Tell me, when did I wrong you? Had you borne
Daughters and sons, you would be pitiful
Your beauty would have waned, though proud as mine.
I tell you, men made ballads of it once,
When I was young, before I was a Queen

THE MUSALMANI (*softened*).

You have proud beauty still

QUEEN

No, proud no more!

My eyes have wept and watched the years go by,
Sorrowing in this land my spirit loathes
Your own words called it waning

THE MUSALMANI.

I was scorned,
And answered you in rage But all remember
Our Rajput bride who came as the full moon
Of autumn rising in our cloud-soft skies
Still, when you move, your coming brings a stir
Whereby all eyes awaken, drawn to gaze,
You have majesty, and all men know you Queen

QUEEN.

Will you not leave this kingdom ? You shall have
 More than your dreams can ask, of gold, of gems—
 My richest dresses, trinkets, perfumes, all—
 So you but go. Go !

THE MUSALMANI.

Sister, be content.

Your day was bright ; nor is it setting yet
 Leave me my hour ; my beauty is not yours,
 That grows to comeliness and gentler grace
 Mine flames, intoxicating all who see,
 Shrivelling in the breath of some fierce wind
 That feeds and slays in one. This year I ask !
 Next year you will be Queen in Vishnupur.

QUEEN.

Listen That ballad shall be written yet—
The Wronged Wife's Vengeance—in my Rajasthan
 We write with flames and blood

THE MUSALMANI (*smiling*).

After my hour !
 Then, if you will to strike ! This hour is mine !

QUEEN

No ! Though I sear my soul to snatch it from you !
 Go home—now, while my heart is patient, go !
 I will send after you all that you ask,
 More than the King will give you Only go.

THE MUSALMANI (*contemptuously*).

Madam, we waste the evening, and the King
 Will come to seek me.

QUEEN (*losing all control*)

Harlot ! Outcast thief !

THE MUSALMANI (*contentedly*)Hard words ! But, like the scourge you promised late,
Not frightening me

QUEEN.

You will not help me, then ?

THE MUSALMANI

You waste your breath. Madam, now bid me go
I take my leave May you be fortunate !

QUEEN.

May I have power to bear this bitterness

And break your heart with grief, as you break mine !

(THE MUSALMANI goes back to the courtyard with
great jingling of anklets and bangles The
QUEEN throws herself on the cushions, and sits
staring before her, with her hands round her
knees The KING enters from the left, he
is a man of about thirty-five, sleek and
unshapely With uneasy gallantry he comes
up to the QUEEN, who takes no notice of him)

KING.

Here, 'mid her circling roses, like the Moon
'Mid gazing stars, the Rose of Women shines !The surging tides of Spring are plucked one way !
Elsewhere the roses hardly bloom, but here
Wave after wave wells up and bursts in foam
They look with dazzled, myriad eyes, they sway,
Faint with intoxication of your beauty

Ambushed behind your jasmines, whence he picks
 A million flowery darts,⁷ the Love-God lurks ;⁸
 And this poor slave, your 'captive, as I came,
 He wounded to the death.

(*He makes to embrace the QUEEN. She rises, and draws back*)

QUEEN

I am hot, and faint

Touch me not

KING.

In my arms that heat allay.
 Come, I will lead you in ; these evening airs,
 Moist from our stretching meres, that daily shrink,
 Grown quags beneath the sun's increasing rays,
 Creep through your veins, and fever your hot brow

QUEEN.

I feel no damps ; rather, a swooning heat,
 Beating like fiery arrows on my brain

KING.

Your flushed face speaks of fever's clutching hands.
 I sent you unguents rich and perfumes rare,
 I sent you messengers to bid you in ;
 Did they not come ?

QUEEN.

They came

KING.

My heart ! my love !

See how my tenderness is struck with fear !
 Grieved for your paling looks, I sent you these,
 (*He touches the tray of scents*)

Perfumes of price, I sought astrologers.
 They have read your stars afresh, and they declare
 This month antagonistic to your life
 I greatly fear these mists, you do not know
 How poison-charged from their moist lairs they
 creep

Love brought me here; my dread'lest sickness prey
 Upoh this delicate body, my delight,
 The golden temple where my dreams resort
 Moon of my life, should clouds your beauty eclipse,
 How should I live?

(He makes to embrace her, but she springs from him)

QUEEN

Why, in extreme of bliss,

Lying in your Musalmani creature's hair!
 Put down those hands! They stain like lepers' flesh!
 You send me flowers and perfumes, after months
 Through which your love lay slumbering, now it
 wakes

Suddenly to this courtier-care for me!
 Evening by evening, 'mid my flowers I walk,
 Only to-day, it seems, the lakes send up
 Mists, that to frames like mine are dangerous,
 And dangerous most when there come stealing by
 Harlots whom I may see from here, perchance!
 Mists! at my father's home, at Udaipur,
 There were no lakes! ⁸ and *Phalgun* ⁹ came not there,
 With warm winds wandering o'er the rippled wave!

(She pauses)

• (Furiously)

No! to those snow-proud, sacred palaces
 Came harlots from the Musalman! Those halls
 Stand unpolluted!

KING (*thunderstruck*).

Harlots !

QUEEN.

Oh, she has come
 Before you looked for her ! You said, by dark ;
(The KING's chagrin shows that this is so)
 But she, on fire to grasp at once and all,
 Came, like the Queen she boasts she has become,
 With sunset glimmering on her painted greed
 Yes, she has come ! Why do you linger here ?

KING.

I have other women share my bed—one more,
 What matter to the Queen of Vishnupur ?
 Had not your father wives besides his Queen ?

QUEEN

He kept his Hindu faith and lineage pure
 On his high pyre a score of women burned,
 Loving and loyal to their Hindu lord

KING

Delhi has Hindu wives, yes, princesses
 Of Rajput blood And I am Delhi here,
 And if I choose to give an alien place
 Among my Hindu wives—

QUEEN

You dare to me,
 A princess of the House of Mewar, speak
 Of Delhi ! Never from my fathers' halls
 Went bride, to sully our proud blood with shame ¹⁰

KING.

Your fathers' house—

QUEEN

Dare not to speak their name,

You, claiming Rajput blood and Rajput line,
 So that my father mated with a crane
 A Rajput swan ! Great words your letters then
 Uttered, of Hindu faith and Hindu pride !
 Here you would build against the Musalman
 A league, to join with his, and break the power
 Of Delhi, setting free our Gods again !
 I came, a girl, thinking to find with you
 The image of my father's glorious rule,
 A little Mewar here, a hedge of spears
 Fronting our savage foes, whose barbarous rage
 Tumbled our towers and shattered the Gods we
 serve

This score of years you have wrought no kingly deed,
 Have succoured no distressed, have crushed no foes
 Save some poor forest-folk, whose huts you burned,
 With vast pomp riding back to Vishnupur,
 While garlands rained upon you and the walls
 Shook to your trumpets ! 'Twas Sikander ¹¹ came,
 From conquest of a second India home !
 No wars save wars on women have you waged

KING

There came no cause

QUEEN

No cause ! A King had found
 Abundant cause, while India bleeding lay
 Under the trampling fury that has ranged

My own dear land with tiger-feet of hate ! ¹²
 Your alien lords, that rule for Delhi here,¹³
 Claimed tribute—did a King's voice answer them ?
 No , the ambassadors—with tribute paid—
 Upon their honoured way were sped with flowers
 When first I came, I quelled my breaking heart—
 “ This is your lord,” I said, “ to whom you owe
 Such worship as by him to God is given ”
 I tried to find you great, as those are great
 From whom I came, where men are men indeed
 I tried to find you brave—oh, you are vile !
 Viler than words can speak ! Do I not know ?
 Sleek body, oiled and garlanded ! Dull brain,
 Dreaming of food and lust, of lust and food !
 You have no other thoughts, no other hopes !
 And I must worship this ! Must call this lord !
 Go to your Moslem bride ! Yet hear me first
 Daily you took your pleasure at her house,
 Nightly you took your pastime at her side,
 And I, a Rajput princess, crushing down
 My heart's fierce, choking sorrow, spake no word
 To-day you bring her through your palace-gate ;
 She comes with palanquin and ordered pomp ;
 She shall go out afoot and to her grave !

KING.

Come, you must beat this foolish anger down !
 Your case and mine are other. I am King.
 The woman must be faithful to her lord ;
 His name she worships—never, not in dreams,
 Shaping the thought of any other God
 But I love where I will, and whence I will
 Call to my bed. Come, you have borne no wrong,
 You are still Queen, ‘although another share

(He is encouraged by her silence and becomes gallant again)

This passion well becomes your loveliness
 Grieve not, I shall grow weary in time, and back
 To you, my heart's true queen, return.

QUEEN (*quivering with amazement*)

Return !

KING.

Assuredly Take heart, your bitter words
 I can forgive

QUEEN

Forgive ! That you should think
 Aught you can say or do lives in that world
 Where my thoughts move ! Fool ! You have seen

Death's eyes

And offer him forgiveness ! Go !

*(He shrinks before her gaze, then shambles away
 As he goes, he turns and speaks in weak rage)*

KING.

I will,

To my new Queen ! And, though you pray and pray,
 You shall not be my Queen again, my people
 Shall hear your shame announced And I will tell
 them

It has been found your children are not mine

*(The QUEEN watches him, erect till he has gone
 out, then she sinks down, covering her face
 with her hands Through the courtyard
 gate enter two men, KRISHNACHARAN BHATTA-*

CHARYA, the priest, and RADHAGOBINDA SINGH, commander of the Vishnupur army. They wait in the background for some sign of recognition. Seeing the QUEEN does not notice them, the BRAHMIN comes forward.)

KRISHNACHARAN (*his tones are almost a caress*)

The Queen is weary. In this month of flowers
Often the body droops in the warm airs,
The brain with pleasure lulls Our Mother sleeps.

QUEEN (*rousing herself and springing up*)

No Dreaming in these pleasant jasmine-bowers,
I did not hear you come My eyes are dazed,
(She hastily brushes away tears.)

The light has gone I saw and heard you not
My service to you, *sirdar*, unto you
My homage, Brahmin.

KRISHNACHARAN

Truly, one might here
Forget there is a world where crawling fires
Of pain feed on the minds and hearts of men.
Your roses yearly wax more bright, more full,
Thickets of stars, your jasmines fleck the dusk
This proud hibiscus——

QUEEN

Brahmin, pardon me
You did not come to praise a woman's flowers
You seek the King, who went from me but now
He is within

KRISHNACHARAN

(To his companion, with a flattering smile for
the Queen.)Our Mother understands
Madam, we did not come to seek the KingRADHAGOBINDA (*fiercely*)No, nor to prate of roses Are there ears
Behind these bushes ?

QUEEN

None

KRISHNACHARAN

The King ?

QUEEN.

Has gone

KRISHNACHARAN (*to RADHAGOBINDA*)Then—shall I speak ? (His companion nods)
Lady, men saw a snake
Steal in this evening to our Master's rooms

QUEEN

The Musalmani harlot ! Sirs, you see
You need not speak in parables

KRISHNACHARAN

She knows !

Our Mother knows Lady, our hearts are wrung,
To see our Mother wronged

QUEEN

He is my lord.^o

A wife no question makes of right or wrong,
If my lord wills, his will is God to me
Until his love return, my love must wait;
Nor even think, *My Lord does wrong in this*.

KRISHNACHARAN (*looking towards his companion*).

A faithful wife! Said I not even so—
The Queen would show herself most meek and loyal?
You have said well And, were it private lust
Enticed our lord abroad to secret shame,
You were not wronged, no, neither were you
wronged
If in this palace where he takes his ease
A thousand Hindu women served our lord
But underneath this roof is brought to-night
A Moslem woman

(*He pauses and watches her face She is very
erect and defiant, but as she speaks her voice
is choked and trembling*)

QUEEN.

Well?

KRISHNACHARAN

His word has gone
That he will make her Queen in Vishnupur.
He jested¹ yesterday with his buffoons,
" I cast my clouts when frayed, my Rajput Queen
Grows pale, I take a new love for the old "
To-morrow Moslem priests shall marry them

QUEEN

I have a dagger that shall marry them !
 Was it for this I left my lion-home
 To share this jackal's cave ? It cannot be !

RADHAGOBINDA ^o

• (*who has restrained himself with difficulty*).

cannot be ! What does a woman know ?

(*Pointing with scorn*)

our perfumes and your flowers ! The realm is
 falling,

nd you, who boast your lion-blood, stand by
 nd doubt the word of those who bid you save it
 'es, save it ! We have heard of Rajput Queens
 Who would, ere they had suffered shame like yours,
 lave fleshed their daggers in barbarian hearts.

Listen ! Her father at the Nawab's court
 Traffics in shoes ; and now in Vishnupur
 The leather-seller's daughter shall be Queen !

The King, besotted, in his lust flings down
 This realm, that stands against the Musalman,

One tiny kingdom, last in all Bengal

He has taken on his head the Prophet's vow,

And calls in alien aid to quench in blood

His people's rage To-day at sunrise went

Messengers to the Nawab's town, with prayer

He would send soon to save his "brother" here

KRISHNACHARAN

"Tis true He has sworn our temples shall be mosques.
 This holy town, that serves the dark-hued God,¹⁴
 Must shout his Name no more. The King has
 promised

To turn his people ; and the harlot laughed,
 " There will be joy in Mewar when they know
 They have a daughter in the Faith at last ! "

QUEEN.

My heart is throbbing in its misery
 What shall I do ?

RADHAGOBINDA

Let the knife cut you free !
 She is closeted with your lord You know the way !

KRISHNACHARAN

Act , and the people's praise shall crown the deed.
 A myriad hearts in Vishnupur to-night
 Turn to their Rajput Queen Go through the town,
 And count the lamps , by every glow they watch,
 Praying, *God give our Mother strength to strike*
And save us !

RADHAGOBINDA

Strike ! The King, his madness past,
 Will turn to you in loving penitence
 You will be tenfold Queen !

QUEEN

Enough ! She dies
 (To RADHAGOBINDA)

Will you call up your guards ?

• RADHAGOBINDA

They wait without

And all the palace-guards are ours , this city
 Is as a storm-swept sea to-night , all hearts

One surging hate against the Musalman.
 They know this harlot comes but as his spy
 My own guards, joining with the King's, shall steal
 Silently round this garden Seek us here,
 Cry once, and at the signal all will rush
 To save our Queen.

QUEEN

Go now, and make all sure
 I will await you here

(*The BRAHMIN and RADHAGOBINDA go out. It is now night. A jackal howls in the jungle, and is answered by a yelling pack. The noise dies down and is succeeded by silence, out of which a voice speaks to the QUEEN, from the shelter of the bushes*)

THE VOICE

Daughter !

QUEEN.

Who speaks ?

Is there a Darkness that would talk with me,
 Answering the crying darkness of my heart ?

(*She gazes into the blackness*)

Father, I see you now How came you here ?
 You have heard all ?

SANNYASI

(*He is seated in the dense shade of a tamarind, his saffron robe so smeared with ashes that it has been almost indistinguishable from the*

darkness ; he is motionless as the tree's trunk behind him The QUEEN can see only the white streaks on his brow, the trident of Siva the Destroyer.)

Fear not I live above
 The wreckage of that phantom sea called life
 Desire and dread cast out, I walk alone,
 Watching the shadows float upon the waves,
 With phantom arms they parry phantom fears,
 They shrink and cry, they laugh and weep and hope.
 As dusk was drooping, in this city I saw
 Shadows that chaffered in the market-place,
 Or underneath their shadow-temples called
 'To worship of the God who dwells not there—
 Blind, ignorant fools, who know not *Thou art That*¹⁵
 There was a shadow climbed a shadow's pyre,
 While other shadows beat on drums and wailed
 Seeking a place to meditate apart,
 Unvext by phantom cries and phantom fears,
 I saw these groves from far, with flaming walls
 Of *palas* shut, and in their shelter spread
 My tiger-skin But even here there came
 A drift of shadows wrangling in the dusk

QUEEN

Father, my heart is like a night of storm,
 With shrieking voices filled and clattering wings
 All the four quarters of the world have plunged
 Their demon-cries into one woman's heart.

SANNYASI

Daughter, be calmed

QUEEN

Be calmed ! while in my heart

Such anguish rises that the world without
 Becomes one voice that bids me die, yet dying
 Bear to the bottomless gulf where I must leap
 Their lives who wrong me ! Father, I have borne
 Such wrongs as never woman thought before.
 You heard him speak , you heard her flout my patience

SANNYASI.

Illusion all , and in the phantom glare
 Cast by a phantom sun those shadows danced
 Now it is night , draw deep within thy spirit,
 The dark will bring emancipation there

QUEEN (*wildly*).

Illusion ! This is no illusion, this !
 His sin is no illusion, nor her scorn.
 My pain is no illusion ! Every nerve
 And every vein is quick with burning life
 I anguish , had they voice, these limbs would shriek.
 Father, give comfort ! Tell me what to do
 Hear me, a Rajput, child of valiant fames,
 Pent in this cage of wrong ! They bid me call
 A coward and bloodless fool my lord and God ,
 They bid me worship one whom all these years—
 Even when I came, a child, with wide eyes filled
 With wonder and belief that he was great—
 My heart has known, more clearly day by day,
 And night by night with fiercer stabs of shame,
 A thing too vile to merit my contempt !
 And I must live with this ! And at life's end
 Must burr with this !

(*She weeps, then checks herself, and speaks more calmly*)

Father, your heart was once
Quick with our hopes and fears ! Will you not
help ?

(*There is silence, broken only by the Queen's
sobbing. Then the Sannyasi's voice is heard,
and seems to be trembling*)

SANNYASI.

Daughter, your words my spirit's crystal peace
Have stained with shadow of trouble long unknown ,
And strangely quivers in its depths my heart
Once I knew hopes and fears, when fame's loud wings
Were clamorous with my praise

QUEEN

What shall I do ?

SANNYASI (*after silence*)

Finish the whole ; lift action's heavy stone,
Shatter the glass of these illusive pangs
Let there be nothing left that shall give back
One mocking image of your agonies
Beyond these shadows, elsewhere shalt thou find
Healing and rest There is no refuge here

QUEEN

Shall I then slay the life that broke my peace ?

SANNYASI

Slaying or not-slaying, these are words Have done !
Heed not these words of men , your webs of pain
Burn, and be free.

Daughter, my blessing take !
 Now leave me to my night of calm again
 (Silence. Then the QUEEN calls)

QUEEN

Subha !

(SUBHASINI enters from the courtyard)
 The day is ended ; wait with me
 The King has gone within ?

SUBHA

He is at rest,
 And would not be disturbed

QUEEN

But not alone !
 Subha, there crept a traitress to him now !
 She shall not wrong me so ! Girl, I must do
 A deed no Rajput princess dreamed to do

SUBHA

Lady, we know and mourn , but you do well
 The courtyard is a bush of spears , and still
 More troops pour in They are your friends, they
 say,
 And come to serve the Gods of Vishnupur
 The Prince, your son, is with them

QUEEN

Bring him here

(SUBHASINI goes to the courtyard, from which the
 BRAHMIN comes)

Is all prepared ?

KRISHNACHARAN.

Our men await your sign

Go, faithful wife ; your husband's honour save,
And save our Gods and realm. Fear not ! One call,
And we are at your side. The Gods are glad

(*As the Queen goes to the private gate the BRAHMIN gives a sign. RADHAGOBINDA enters, and behind him his men file in from the courtyard. They are carrying spears and matchlocks, some have even bows and arrows. Every third man has a torch, which he holds low. They disperse themselves through the garden, and are hidden behind the bushes. There is darkness again, except for the faint glow flung upward by the concealed torches. RADHAGOBINDA SINGH comes forward to the centre of the stage and joins the BRAHMIN. The latter goes up to the platform and stoops down to scrutinise it. He laughs gently.*)

See, we have sweetmeats here ! Look, dates, and figs

Crystalled with sugar ! Honey-crusted rice,
In balls that drip with goodness !

(*While RADHAGOBINDA is helping himself a torch shucks above a bush to the left, where there is a clashing of weapons. He springs forward nervously.*)

RADHAGOBINDA

Down with that torch !

Keep still those 'cursed' spears !

(*An owl hoots overhead*)

Did you hear that ?

The cry that brings 'on' death ! We are betrayed !

KRISHNACHARAN (*scornfully*)

What, *sirdar* ! Do you jump for Lakshmi's ¹⁶ bird ?
It brings good omen ! Watching o'er our deed
Its mistress sits

RADHAGOBINDA.

My mind was otherwhere
It was the night whose stillness broke my spirit.

KRISHNACHARAN (*laughing*).

Perchance it was the Musalmani's soul
Winging its way to Hell (*The QUEEN appears*)

RADHAGOBINDA (*shouting*)

• The Queen is here !
Advance, men ! Flash your torches out, and show
Our Mother has no cause for fear to-night.

(*Torches are shown above the bushes The soldiers press forward, and the stage is filled with light The QUEEN steps on to the platform*)

KRISHNACHARAN (*with lowered voice*)

Is the deed done ?

QUEEN (*addressing herself to the soldiers*)

• Heavy calamity
Has fallen upon this wretched land My lord
By misadventure on a serpent trod,
It reared, with swelling hood The King is dead

(*There is a silence of stupefaction Then the BRAHMIN's voice is heard, incredulous*)

KRISHNACHARAN

The King is dead ?

QUEEN.

Even so

(*She catches sight of her son, a boy of about twelve, who is standing with SUBHASINI. She beckons, and SUBHASINI thrusts him on to the platform*)

The King is here!

SOLDIERS (*shouting*).

Hail, Maharaja! Long life to the King!

QUEEN.

I leave him to your hands, too young to walk
Without a father's strength, a mother's care
(*Addressing him*.)

Son, somewhere in my spirit's torment lies
A deeper pit of wailing, all my heart
Breaking because I leave my children Friends,
Father and mother both be to this King!
He is but a child, as I was but a child
When first I came to be your Queen My son!
(*She embraces him*)

Clasping you round, your mother's arms are fire,
Her spirit sobs and dies! My child! my son!
Take him among you! Let my eyes forget!

(*The PRINCE is taken by the BRAHMIN, who gives him to one of the officers, he is led away*
The QUEEN turns to the BRAHMIN)

Bid them prepare my husband's pyre; and send
Heralds through all this city's wakeful ways
Go, spread your heavy news—say the King died,
By visitation of our holy Gods,
And say beside him dies his faithful wife,
Whose spirit longs to join her glorious lord

ALL (*shouting*)

O faithful wife ! O blessed, blessed *Sati* !

KRISHNACHARAN

(*in a low voice to the Queen*)

What of the snake whose poison slew our lord ?

RADHAGOBINDA

Subahdar !

SUBHADAR

Sir !

RADHAGOBINDA

March to the burning-ground ;
And, as you go, proclaim our Mother's praise

(*The soldiers file out, with shouts of Blessed Sati !*

The Queen is left with SUBHASINI, the BRAHMIN and RADHAGOBINDA SINGH. SUBHASINI and RADHAGOBINDA have torches)

QUEEN

Brahmin, you asked me of the snake Within,
A woman whimpers in some corner there,

(*She points to the palace*)

Waiting the stroke of death Deal as you will
A Rajput Queen, I keep my knife unstained
By blood that would defile my hate and me

KRISHNACHARAN

No woman, but a Goddess, you have saved
Our land and Gods !

QUEEN.

Go, go, good friends ! Ah, see
 How far ahead the soldiers' torches fling
 Their glimmer on the night ! My pyre prepares
 I would not in this storm of death pass hence
 With spirit panged, and troubled, as now you see
 I must go in, and dress myself to die
 A Rajput Queen.

BOTH

We take your dust, and go.

(They stoop down, even the BRAHMIN touching her feet in awe, then pass out. The QUEEN is left alone with SUBHA. The stage is in darkness, except for SUBHA's torch)

QUEEN

Subha, the wedding-raiment that I brought
 From my dear city—my eyes dim ! Oh, my heart !
 I shall not see those sacred towers again !
 The very curs that walk those holy streets
 Are nobler than the Gods that habit here !
 I will be proud again ! But Subha, Subha !
 I was in Heaven, and sent to live in Hell
 And call a Demon lord ! Why are we born . . .
 Women, to break our hearts on worthless things ?
 To flower, bear children, age, and die in shame !
 Come, let us go. I have babes whom I would see ;
 Their voices call me back, their outstretched hands
 Clutch me, and in the road that I must walk
 I stumble, blind with tears Look for me, girl,
 I cannot see—Father, are you still there ?

(Putting her palms together in supplication, she looks towards the darkness where the SANNYASI was sitting)

Now, ere I shut my ears to human word,
 Speak the last message I shall ever hear
 Father, you pointed me the way, and now,
 I seek your blessing

SANNYASI (*out of the darkness*)

Daughter, go in peace

Illusion's webs are torn, thy soul goes free

(*The QUEEN makes a profound obeisance, then she and SUBHA go out. The stage is left in utter darkness and silence. Voices are heard faintly in the distance. Then the SANNYASI's voice is heard, in slow, ringing tones*)

Illusion—comfort of this flowery night

And warm spring airs, whose fragrant wings shake down

A dream of ease—illusion of this sky,
 Trancing the world with stars, and through the dark,
 Like the brief, dying lives of cheated men,
 The fireflies glimmer! And illusion late
 Of shadows dreaming that they hoped and feared;
 And one, a shadow, dreamed she was in pain!
 All in the whirl and scurry of Death swept hence,
 Bladed with passion's dust and with the mist
 Of ignorance! (He is silent)

And now night wraps again

My spirit—the lights are gone, the voices die

(*In the distance a light is seen moving on the road, voices are heard indistinctly and in confusion. The light vanishes, the voices die away. Darkness and silence*)

NOTES ON TWO INDIAN PLAYS

I THE QUEEN OF RUIN

- 1 A son is of the first importance, where ancestor-worship binds the generations together
- 2 Gotama Buddha to orthodox Hindus an incarnation of Vishnu (Narayan), who thereby entangled the foolish with sophistries, and snared their steps into Hell
- 3 Ceylon is still mainly a Buddhist country
- 4 *Shyāmā*, "the Dark One," is a title of Kali
- 5 The rainiest month, June-July
- 6 *Ahimsa*, "harmlessness," is a Hindu doctrine, often transgressed, but never quite forgotten
- 7 Ceylon is *kāl*, "Time" in its destructive aspect.
- 8 Huge kettledrums, of which the last set were carried off by Akbar and can still be seen at Delhi, were beaten when a Rana of Chitor went out of the fortress or returned to it
- 9 The Rajputs of Chitor claim to be descended from the Sun-God
- 10 The colour which signified that they were devoted to death

II THE CLOUDED MIRROR

1. Siva, whose common name is Mihadeva, "the Great God"
- 2 A common title, often signifying merely a landlord
- 3 *Suttee*, "a faithful wife"
- 4 *Tara*, "a star." *Bibi*, a Musalman woman

118 NOTES ON TWO INDIAN PLAYS

5 Vishnupur is a great centre for historical ballads, some of which are the only records of important events in West Bengal

6 A reference to the *Holi*-festival, in honour of Krishna Obscene songs are sung, and red juice squirted over passers-by

7 The Indian Love-God uses flower-tipped arrows.

8 Udaipur has the most beautiful lakes in India

9 The Spring-month, February–March.

10 Mewar, unlike many Rajput States, never gave a bride to the Mogul's harem

11 Alexander the Great.

12 The Emperor Aurangzeb ravaged Rajput territory, destroying countless temples

13 The Musalman viceroys of Bengal claimed tribute, which Vishnupur sometimes paid

14 Krishna, "the Dark One"

15 *Tat tvam asi*, "Thou art That," the master-word of Hindu pantheistic philosophy

16 The Goddess of Luck In Bengali folk-lore the owl is her steed

SUTTEE

SUTTEÉ

THE rite by which a Hindu widow became *sati*, "faithful," is generally traced by European writers to a Scythian source, by Hindus to the superior nature of Indian wedded love. Yet, on the latter theory, it remains a development, for, though ancient, it was not of the highest antiquity. The *Rig-Veda* very fully details the funeral ceremonies of the Aryans, but contains only one or two lines that *may*, on a racking of their natural meaning, glance at *suttee*, and the text that was held to support it explicitly was proved by Professor Wilson to have been deliberately changed, the genitive of *agni*, "fire," having been substituted for the adverb *agre*, "first." The original,

Ārohantu janayo yonim agre

(Let the mothers go up to the dwelling first),

became

Ārohantu janayo yonim agneh

(Let the mothers go up to the dwelling of fire)

But the custom of two millenniums had, by the time that the abolition of *suttee* became a vexing question to the Government of the East India Company, made that other question, of its Scriptural sanction, an irrelevance. It was only when the reformers and the Brahmins came to battle together that the textual support of the rite became important, and that battle was not the deciding one in the campaign against *suttee*, since it was won after the abolition.

Herodotus has left an account of the wholesale holocaust of slaves and attendants of every description which formed the funeral rites of the ancient kings of the tribes of Central Asia, the "Scythians". Similar sacrifices were common in other countries of antiquity; and Hindus may have borrowed the practice of widow-immolation from Central Asia. Its shocking prevalence among the Rajputs, who probably are the descendants of successive waves of immigration later than the Aryan ones, possibly later than the beginning of our era, suggests this. But the rite was found by Alexander's soldiers, in the fourth century B.C., to be commonly practised by tribes in the Punjab, and especially by the city of Taxila. This fact suggests that it was not taken by Hinduism from a Scythian source, but was indigenous, with human sacrifice and other primitive cruelties, when the Aryans entered India, and was taken up into their religion along with the barbarian clans who tenaciously clung to it. It was always pre-eminently a rite to glorify the warrior caste, and princes especially. The most terrible suttees on record are those at the obsequies of kings. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century A.D., 200 or even three thousand women were burnt at the funerals of the kings of Vijayanagar, in South India. "A cinder-mound near Nimbapuram, north-east of Vijayanagar, marks the scene of those appalling holocausts." Many scores of women were often burnt with one of the kings of Central India, especially those of Rajput. In late as 1841 three hundred and ten women perished with the 5th, Raja Sucket Singh, in the Punjab.

Suttee generally took the form of burning alive

But the weaver caste buried alive when they practised the rite, and burial was common in the Telugu districts of South India. Occasionally suttee was by drowning. The method of burning varied in different districts. In South India, in Orissa, and sometimes in Bengal, the pyre was in a pit, generally sunken only a few feet below the level of the surrounding ground, into this the widow jumped after the pyre was alight. But in North India, including Bengal, she generally climbed on to her husband's pyre and sat down with his head in her lap, his eldest son applied the torch, or, failing a son, the nearest male relation. In Western India both bodies were placed in a grass hut, and the widow set the hut on fire inside. In Nepal she sat behind her husband's body, at his head. She was by no means always left free, especially in Bengal, it was common to bind her to her husband's corpse with cords, or to fasten down both bodies with curving bamboo poles. In Rajasthan, where the rite reached its most magnificent and least squalid form, she rode on horseback to the pyre, with face unveiled for the first time. Rajput women burned more willingly than those of other parts of India. The women being members of a warrior clan, whose men died freely and readily in battle, the sacrifice seemed a smaller and fairer matter than to the women of more peaceable folk. The courage of its innumerable *satis*, no less than the desperate bravery of its men, casts a sombre grandeur about the story of Chitor. Tod tells us that it was usual, when they came of an age to understand the action's significance, to put a lighted lamp in a Rajput girl's hand and a knife in a boy's, to show the death each must die, by the flame and by battle.

The rite inspired horror in the Mogul conquerors

of India, and Akbar and his son and successor, Jahangir, both tried to suppress it. On one occasion Akbar rode nearly a hundred miles at full speed to rescue the daughter-in-law of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, who was unwilling to burn. It is customary to say that the Mogul efforts at suppression failed; the truth is, they were substantially successful, so much so that the English Resident at Delhi, Sir Charles Metcalfe, was able to forbid suttee there twenty years before the British Government of India dared to prohibit it at Calcutta.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century Albuquerque anticipated Akbar, and forbade the rite within the Portuguese territories. In the early nineteenth century the Dutch at Chinsura, the Dines at Serampur, and the French at Chandernagore, either by direct prohibition or by strong discouragement stopped suttee, and Hindus in those towns who wished to burn their widows had to take them into British territory and get the sanction of a British magistrate. It must be remembered that all these prohibitions, with the exception of the partially successful Mogul one, were within small areas, easily controlled and with no large population. Then so, the East India Company showed needless timidity through the thirty years of vacillation which preceded Lord Bentinck's prohibition of suttee in 1829. Government was unhappy about the terrible prevalence of the rite in Bengal, and was constantly consulting its officials as to whether it could be safely abolished, and Hindu pundits as to whether it was regarded as commanded, rather than merely recommended in their sacred books. In 1823 Directions were issued forbidding the sacrifice of a widow under sixteen, or agir ^{if} their will, and mailing on the potter's wheel

of a magistrate, the presence of a police officer (not necessarily, or usually, a European) at the ceremony, and the registration of the act. Unfortunately, these Directions, by giving suttees the prestige of legal sanction, increased them, and in the Bengal Presidency (which included parts of what are now the United Provinces) the number of suttees reported went up—378 in 1815, 442 in 1816, 707 in 1817; 839 in 1818, the worst year. After 1818 they dropped slightly, and averaged between five and six hundred a year till 1829, the year of prohibition. At last Lord Bentinck, after a careful canvassing of all authorities, determined, largely on his own initiative, to abolish the rite. This was done in December 1829. It had been ascertained that in the native army, which was alleged to be very devoted to suttee, the practice was almost unknown—which was not strange, seeing that the men, with the exception of about a thousand in the artillery, were not recruited from Bengal proper, where the vast majority of the suttees in the Bengal Presidency occurred.

After prohibition in British India the Government tried, as opportunity served, to have suttee made illegal in the semi-independent States. But the same timidity for a long time persisted in its policy here. Rajasthan was the country where suttees were most numerous, and where tradition was most insistent that the funeral of a man of rank demanded honours. The dreadful frequency of suttee throughout Central India in former times is brought home to the traveller by the shrines in honour of widows who died on their husbands' pyres, and, most of all, by the innumerable *sati* stones—stones engraved with the impress of a woman's hand, generally vermillioned, or sometimes with a hand and arm, sometimes with two

feet. These stones often have the figures of the sun and moon in their upper portion. The way up through the magnificent defences of Chitor is strewn with them, and the plateau itself has them almost everywhere. In such places as the *Mausais* at Udaipur there are not only the *chattris* or memorial platforms of the Ranas, but lines of stones on the ground, the large central one representing the Rana, the smaller ones at each side his *satis*. I have counted over sixty of these with one Rana.

And for a long time after 1829 princes of Central India burned with these awful honours. From Rajasthan the rite had been adopted by the Sikhs, despite the fact that most of their *gurus* had forbidden it, and it had become common among the Marathas. But the Marathas early lost their enthusiasm for it, and towards the end of the eighteenth century Maratha rulers had even forbidden it, the Peshwa in his personal dominions, and in South India the Maratha Raja of Tanjore. After suttee was prohibited in British India its strongholds were the Panjab and Rajasthan. Events brought it to an end in the former. The two Sikh wars with the British resulted in the annexation of the Panjab in 1849, when it became subject to the law that prohibited the rite, which continued for a few years longer in two of the protected Sikh States, Jhind and Nabha (till 1860). But between 1829 and 1849 there were many suttees among the Sikhs. In 1839, at the funeral of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, nine women burned, and there were suttees at the funerals of his son and successor, Kharak Singh, and of his grandson, Rao Nihal Singh. In 1845, after the execution of Jawahir Singh, his soldiery forced four women on to their master's pyre.

In Rajasthan, the three powerful States of Alwar, Bikanir, and Udaipur continued to ignore unofficial remonstrances, which were the only protest the Government of British India felt empowered to make. In 1838, at the funeral of Jawan Singh, Maharana of Udaipur, eight women burned, four years later there was one suttee at the funeral of his successor. At last Lord Dalhousie, nearly a quarter of a century after the cessation of the rite in British India, took up with a vigour that was almost ruthless this question of its persistence in native States. He made it plain that he would not tolerate it any longer, and after a long resistance the three powerful States of Rajasthan acquiesced in his demand that they should prohibit it, and the rest of Rajasthan followed their lead. Jaipur and many smaller States, both within and outside Rajasthan, had already made it illegal. But the acquiescence of Udaipur, at least, was sullen and unwilling, and, after Dalhousie had gone, the funeral of Maharana Sarup Singh, in 1861, was disgraced by the sacrifice of a slave-girl.

Nepal, which is outside the influence of the Indian Government, continued the rite down to our own day. I believe it is still legal there. At the funeral of the famous statesman and soldier, Sir Jung Bahadur, in 1877, three women burned.

The Hinduised islands of Bali and Lombok practised suttee on a scale unknown in India after the outstanding instance of the burning of three hundred women at the funeral of Suchet Singh in 1844. Suttee here was by burning or by stabbing with the *kriss*, or Malay knife. Sir Charles Eliot, writing in 1921, says "It is believed still to take place in noble families". Instances of illegal suttee sprinkled the nineteenth

century to its close in many parts of Northern India. Rajasthan and Bihar provided most of these. The Udaipur one in 1861 was the last one at the funeral of a ruling chief, but from time to time a suttee took place at the obsequies of a noble. The last was in the Datia State¹ in 1895. Bihar had a succession of suttees even later than this, in 1901, 1907, 1904, 1905². These cases brought the instigators and those who presided into the police-courts, and were punished by imprisonment or penal servitude. And from time to time a woman has poured kerosene over her clothes and burnt herself at home. This happened in Calcutta in 1911, and I well remember the hysterical admiration of the Calcutta Indian Press and the excitement of the mob that rushed to get relics of the martyr. Up to the present time the most disquieting thing about suttee has been the lack of conscience about it and its exaltation by Indian writers. The Bihar suttees of the twentieth century were extolled as worthy of the Hindu ideal of womanhood, an ideal claimed to be the highest the world possesses. What is perhaps stranger still, there have been European and American men and women who have praised suttee, not seeing that, however brave many of the women who died were—I forget, for the moment, the countless unwilling and terrified victims—the world has seen no more ignoble selfishness than that which demanded such worship and sacrifice to the male.

¹ For this information I am indebted to Lieut.-Colonel C. Leford Luard, C.I.E.

² In 1913 there was one near Allahabad. In 1906 there were suttees in the Punjab and in Calcutta.

